The jingling Geordie: community arts and the regional culture of the North East of England

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OF THE NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND

KEITH ARMSTRONG

M.A. THESIS

UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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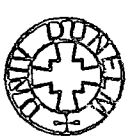

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In the light of the massive economic and social changes which have affected the North East of England over the last 25 years, the author assesses the vitality of the indigenous culture and reflects upon current cultural trends and the North East's future, particularly in relation to a regional Europe.

He traces the folk-tradition of the region and looks at ways in which this can be drawn upon to develop a meaningful link between past and present. He looks closely at the changing nature of class-relationships in the North East and reflects upon how a valid local culture can survive in a multi-cultural society.

He draws upon his own extensive experience in Community Arts, looking at definitions of the term in the new political climate and arguing for its positive contribution to the cultural debate.

He dwells on the issue of regionalism and devolution in a new Europe, comparing the situation in the North East of England with political and cultural changes in Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom.

'THE JINGLING GEORDIE': Community Arts and the Regional Culture of the North East of England

KEITH ARMSTRONG, M.A. Thesis, University of Durham, School of Education

CONTENTS

'I wait for the six-five Plymouth train
glowering at Durham. First rain,
then hail, like teeth spit from a skull,
then fog obliterate it. As we pull
out of the station through the dusk and fog,
there, lighting up, is Durham, dog
chasing its own cropped tail,
University, Cathedral, Gaol'.

(Tony Harrison, extract from 'Durham')

'Cobbled webs of my thoughts
Hang around around your lanes.
A brass band nestles in my head,
Cosy as a bed-bug.
I'm reading from a balcony
Poems of revolution.
It's Gala Day and the words are lost
In the coal-dust of your lungs'.

(Keith Armstrong, extract from 'Durham')

Chapter 1. ROOTS AND BEGINNINGS: 'GEORDIE' AND THE WORLD

'So give is that bit comfort, keep your feet still
Geordie lad,
And divn't drive me bonny dreams away'.

(Joe Wilson)

"In Britain, we appear to have a paradox: a polity without any vestige of federal authority; a highly centralised state. Yet a strong sense of separate identity within the four nations has taken two areas, Scotland and Northern Ireland, to a point at which secession seems more plausible than a continuation of the status quo ... For the future: is some form of federalism possible and practicable - crucially, within the English regions - which can stabilise the UK situation, and integrate it within European institutions?" (Christopher Harvie, The Rise of Regional Europe, 1994, p7).

This dissertation seeks to investigate the regional identity of the North East of England, in all its diversity. The North East represents one of the strongest areas within England which has a very distinct cultural sense of itself, but this is often couched in a vague, even tribalistic, fashion and restricted by a narrowness which is inward looking and lacking universal vision. It is my intention to present an account of the cultural strength of the North East by investigating the current situation in the context of the decline of the major industries and the tensions

created by an overtly centralised government. The present-day cultural climate will be set in a political and economic context with a particular focus on the indigenous population and its cultural heritage.

I will seek to analyse this heritage by drawing on a sense of historical development, by stressing that we cannot come to terms with a regional identity without a knowledge of our history and a feeling for our roots. This will entail a focus on the positive, celebratory aspects of the North East's heritage as well as a critique of the narrowness and chauvinism which is the downside of the indigenous culture.

"The North is characterised by a strong and distinctive regional culture which is ignored in the current administrative structure and by a major democratic deficit - with over 50 per cent of the regional electorate voting Labour at the last general election. There is a powerful case for giving democratic political expression to this strong regional identity by the creation of a directly-elected regional assembly. The case for a rapid and decisive move to elected regional government is very strong in the North, even if it is not so strong in some other regions" (Campaign for a Northern Assembly, Discussion Document, 1996).

This is a crucial period for the political development of the North East and my study will attest to this by looking closely at the claims of bodies such as the C.N.A. the Labour Party, and Northern Arts in the context of the current tensions in the United Kingdom, Europe and beyond. In doing this, I will be

looking at the federal governmental structures of, for example, Germany, to see what implications might arise for a devolved system of power in Britain.

My analysis will, hopefully, be a contribution to the debate on the North East's role in Europe and in the processes of globalisation. I will investigate the position of tourism and the heritage industry in all of this with a close look at the positive contribution they make, as well as the inherent dangers of sanitising our history to make it digestible for the consumption of locals and tourists alike: to question how far 'heritage' distorts reality and truth, negates struggle and renders our history cosy in a way which neuters any real understanding of our cultural inheritance.

Crucial to this study is a stress on 'class'. I will be seeking to establish that, despite attempts to diminish its importance, it is still a significant motivating force in the North East and without an understanding of its influence it is not possible to arrive at any meaningful perception of the region's development. This will involve, specifically, a close study of 'the Arts' in the region and of the concept of 'Community Arts', bringing my own experience to bear on the issue, as well as that of other key practitioners. The tensions between 'indigenous' culture, the 'literati' and the middle class 'white-settlers' will be highlighted by case studies, often based on interviews, focusing on, for example, Northern Arts, Amber Associates and Folkworks, as well as my own work with East Durham Community Arts, 'Strong

Words' and 'Northern Voices'. Key regional characters such as wood-engraver Thomas Bewick, the Newcastle-born working-class writer Jack Common, and the pitman-poets Tommy Armstrong and Joe Skipsey, will also be highlighted in arguing the case for a dynamic working-class heritage which can serve as the basis for a cultural resurgence in the North East.

Another key element in this study is that of 'folk culture': how far this can be said to be a vibrant living thing and how far it has become mythologised, made quaint, regurgitated as pseudo-'music hall' entertainment or in 'finger-in-the-ear' folk-clubs where middle-class social workers render songs about working 'down-the-pit' (!). How confident, for example, is the indigenous population in its own culture and its place in the United Kingdom, compared to, say, the Scots, the Irish and the Welsh? Indeed, how far is the North East really a region at all, other than a mere amalgam of different localities with their own petty loyalties and rivalries? Does it actually want and, indeed, merit greater autonomy?

Fundamental to my argument is the notion of a 'progressive' North East culture ('the future we build from the past') aware of the positive aspects of its heritage, more confident of its place within Britain, Europe and, indeed, the world, celebratory of its finest traditions but open to fresh multi-cultural influences and the advantages of new technology. This implies a critique of the more philistine aspects of local Labour councils, and of their insularity in many ways, as well as of the arrogance of business

and the Conservative Party in establishing quangos over local people's heads. It also implies a fundamental reassessment of so-called 'Municipal Art' contrasted with an analysis of the role of 'Community Arts' in raising political awareness and engagement in local people and in helping them find their own voices.

"Over-centralised government is not only undemocratic but inefficient too. That is why we are committed to decentralising government at all levels and bringing it closer to the people. Our guiding principle is that power should be dispersed as widely as possible, and should be exercised as locally as is practicable. England now has an extensive de facto tier of regional government. But this is unelected, unaccountable and largely unknown. The English regions have administration without representation" (Labour Party consultation paper - 'A Choice for England', 1996).

I will argue for the decentralisation of 'Culture', for a greater awareness of our own history in a local and global context, for a critique of the heritage industry, for a vital and progressive culture in the hands of local people themselves and not foisted upon them by arts bureaucrats, quangos or other governmental and business agencies, and for a reaffirmation of the role that 'class' plays as a key agent in our increasingly complex and multi-cultural society.

It has been my concern in promoting these arguments to document my own Community Arts work and experience for the first time, in order that my work is made widely available to practitioners in

the field and to the general reader. I believe that it represents an important contribution to the culture of the North East of England and has a useful role to play in developing regional links elsewhere, particularly with Scotland, Wales, Ireland and other areas of England, as well as throughout Europe generally. It is hoped that the thesis will stimulate debate in the North East region and beyond.

Much of the material I have used and analysed is of a community-based nature, for example work from local writers' groups and locally-produced oral histories. It is, I feel, important that these documents see the light of day and I have placed them alongside more academic texts in a conscious outreach approach.

In working on the thesis, I have employed an action research methodology, constantly opening up my thoughts not only to my supervisor but to other Community Arts practitioners, community activists and academics, either through direct discussion or publishing and broadcasting. I have very much taken this opportunity to challenge and develop my own understanding of Community Arts and the socio-economic and political nature of North East regional culture in a local and global perspective.

While some useful work has been done already in this field, in adopting an approach which has involved interviewing key cultural practitioners and analysts in the field, I have been conscious of the major gaps to be filled in documenting the diverse aspects of North East culture. My choice of interviewees has been facilitated by my own extensive knowledge of regional cultural

practice, the contacts I have developed over several years and the recommendations of other cultural practitioners. By 'cultural practitioners' I mean experienced activists in the Community Arts field who have direct contact with local people in their work. I have chosen a range of such activists to interview, based on their long-term commitment to the region and the respect they have earned from their dedication to this area of work. In presenting the views and experiences of such key figures, often for the first time, I feel I have fulfilled a useful role in presenting this unique information to a wider audience. In general, I believe there is insufficient analysis of cultural practice in the North East, and I hope this thesis will help to engender further debate within the region and beyond.

Chapter 2. A SENSE OF TRADITION

> "My friends include members of the literary bourgeoisie and lads from the unprinted proletariat. Both parties talk well and you'd probably enjoy a crack with them as much as I do. But here's the pity. The bourgeois ones get published right and left - especially left; the others are mute as far as print goes, though exceedingly vocal in public-houses. Now I've often felt it would be good to swop them around for a change".
>
> (Jack Common)

In his book 'Seven Shifts', first published back in 1938, the Newcastle upon Tyne-born writer Jack Common edited together the writings of seven working men, from railway fireman to plasterer, referring to them as "the lads from the unprinted proletariat". This served as one of the inspirations behind publishing projects such as 'Strong Words', which I established with Huw Beynon and others in 1977, with the aim of affording local people in North East England the opportunity of expressing themselves in their own words, in writing or on tape.

Jack Common was born at 44 Third Avenue, in the Heaton area of Newcastle, from railway stock. He wrote about his growing up there in two rather autobiographical novels, 'Kiddar's Luck' and its sequel 'The Ampersand'. I was born in the same Heaton myself some forty years after Common but his novels were the kind of

books I seldom discovered at school - they captured the atmosphere of Newcastle working-class life and the struggle to make ends meet. They were about my town, my community, in the way that the English Literature syllabus at Heaton Grammar School was not.

At school, poetry, for example, was to be learned by heart and parroted in front of the class. Certainly, in the senior school, students were not encouraged to write poetry themselves. It remained the exclusive preserve of a handful of, usually dead, 'geniuses'. All of this frustration welled up in me until, having left school, I began to write seriously myself, about my culture and my community and, in particular, the North East of England I loved, set in an historical tradition.

The Newcastle poet George Charlton wrote recently in the journal 'Northern Review' that the North East has no poetic tradition (Northern Review, Vol. 1, 1995, p81-8). How far is this true? It seems to me that he is taking too narrow a view of what we call 'culture'. He is locked in to the 'Times Literary Review' school of literature where we are to be judged alongside the Wordsworths, the T.S. Eliots and, with the North East in mind, the Basil Buntings. What of a culture which takes in not only poetry but folk-song, music-hall, political broadsides, football chants, dialect, pop-music? Is there not, for example, poetry in local songs such as 'Keep Your Feet Still, Geordie Hinny' or 'Cushy Butterfield', even 'The Blaydon Races'? Such a broad view of culture would question the standards of 'the literati', even

their definition of 'poetry'. Is there not also 'poetry' in everyday patter, in pub conversations, at least occasionally?

"Today ... it is vitally important for writers, folk-singers, critics and researchers to sustain and energise our distinctive and differing regional cultures, both written and oral" (W.E. Parkinson, in 'Poetry in the North East'; p107-121 of British Poetry Since 1960, 1972). The folk-historian A.L. Lloyd spoke of the "supreme importance [of] ... drawing together the scattered and hidden bits of heritage and ... stimulating the continuation of workers' creative traditions" (quoted in Parkinson, p107). Despite the fact that our Regional Arts Board, Northern Arts, has some kind of policy to deal with issues of race, gender and disability, it scarcely regards class as an issue, more so since the demise of the traditional industries of mining and shipbuilding in the North East region. Is there not almost a 'middle-class relish' in being able to sweep away the 'awkward squads' of the working-classes and to get on with implementing the policies of the Arts Council and the quangos in the kind of 'art for art's sake' spectacle represented by the imposition of the 1996 Visual Arts U.K. Festival? What 'U.K.', we might ask, and what future for it?

"Art has to be 'life-affirming', or, more accurately, re-affirm those liberal middle-class values that everything and everyone is jolly, decent and wonderful. Fuck that for a laugh" (Irving Welsh, author of 'Trainspotting', The Guardian, 13/9/96). The Russian writer, Yevgeni Zamyatin, who actually spent some time on

Tyneside prior to the Russian Revolution as a naval engineer and wrote a novel, 'Islanders' (Salamander Press, Edinburgh, 1984), about middle-class Jesmond, affirmed that "true literature can only exist where it is created not by conscientious and loyal officials but by madmen, heretics, dreamers, rebels and sceptics". There would seem to be precious little rebelliousness on show, for example, at the so-called 'Northern Electric Durham Literature Festival'. Indeed, one could not imagine the 'Northern Electric Yevgeni Zamyatin'!

Normally, when for example, it is applied to literature, the term 'regional' is used to suggest "minor poetry, written in obscure impenetrable dialects and concerned with parochial subjects of largely local and hence limited interest" (Parkinson, Poetry in the North East, 1972, p107-121). However, a more vital view would be that "a unique regional literature should include a regional awareness, a response to those features that make a region distinctive, and the people in it aware that it is so; its history, political struggles, economic adversities, traditions, folklore, myth, people, humour and language" (ibid).

The pitman-poet Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903) who was raised at Percy Main, near North Shields, was the subject of a musical documentary I worked on back in 1991. Skipsey interested me, because of a number of biographical factors: his father was shot and killed by the local police during a miners' strike when Joseph was only four months old; Skipsey began work down the pit when he was seven but, through self-education, went on to work as

custodian of Shakespeare's birthplace at Stratford and as an assistant librarian at Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society. Skipsey was adopted by Victorian luminaries such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Oscar Wilde who were glad to make the acquaintance of someone from the 'labouring classes'. He was an original 'worker-writer', the voice of the common man who read his ballads in miners' institutes and the like. Whilst his poetry scarcely scaled the heights, it at least spoke up for the disenfranchised and the humble. Its greatest weakness lies in its affectedness, its attempts to ape the style of the 'literati' rather than develop confidently from the local indigenous voice. In an autobiographical sketch, Skipsey wrote of his early days down the pit:

"In those days I didn't know that there was such a thing as poetry, but the older lads in the pit, the putter lads as they were called, had a habit of ballad singing. It was seldom that they knew a ballad right through but they used to sing snatches of ballads and songs at their work, and these fastened themselves in my memory ... I do not doubt that the lilt of the old ballads has given a tone to whatever music my verse may be supposed to possess". He goes on, "Many of my smaller pieces were composed as I was walking to and from the pit and some of them have been praised as amongst the best that I have written" (from Armstrong, K. et al, The Pitman Poet from Percy Main, cassette, 1991).

Skipsey is in the same tradition as Tommy Armstrong, the pitman-poet from Tanfield Lea, and song-writers such as Joe Wilson and

Geordie Ridley from the Tyneside music-hall era. Their literary style may be crude and unsophisticated but they speak from experience and communicate spiritedly to their own class. They, in the manner of a minor Robbie Burns, remain a strong influence in my own work and an inspiration behind the publication of poems by the Tyneside shipyard worker Jack Davitt, alias 'Ripyard Cuddling', for example. In my introduction to his 'Shipyard Muddling' I wrote: "Many poets have not written with an understanding of the real issues which confront the majority of 'ordinary' people. This has, in my view, prevented much of English poetry from communicating to any groups of people other than a narrow academic elite ... This collection proves too that poetry is a tool for us all - something that is not yielded only by a narrow, chosen few but is available to everyone. What these poems lack in literary technique they more than make up for in their refreshing openness and accessibility" (Ed. Armstrong, K., Strong Words, 1977).

In his essay on North East poetry, Parkinson talks of the strength of the "oral tradition" lying "in the close creative relationship between the individual and his community". He goes on to assert that, "modern poets in the North East, standing apart from their communities, have lost this creative relationship, and are prone to the self-regarding excesses of an illusory individualism". Because "most of the people's creative effort was found in the oral tradition ... the written tradition of the region barely exists" (Parkinson, Poetry in the North East, p107-121, 1972).

Tolstoy remarked that "the only books that the people understand and like are not the false and useless books written for the people but those which come from the people". In a more modern but similar vein, the poet Adrian Mitchell has affirmed that "most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people". Parkinson talks of "the potential of their dialects discovered in the oral tradition" and quotes, as an example, the evidence of a ten year-old pit lad given in 'The Children's Employment Commission Report 1842', where the boy, describing the atmosphere at Low Fell Colliery after an explosion, stated that the sparks from his flint mill "tumbled doon slowly like drops of dark blood". "Responding unflinchingly, as this pit lad did, to the realities of experience, grasping what is important, founded in the texture of daily life, a regional literature would give us a clearer conception of events, ourselves, our past, the present, and catch the wave of the future; such a living tradition would transcend the parochial" (ibid).

"We have no real use for the spurious past, any more than nostalgia has any use as a creative emotion. At best we turn it into a commodity, and following the changed language of the arts, justify its exploitation as a touristic resource. The result is a devaluation of significance, an impoverishment of meaning" (Hewison, The Heritage Industry, 1987, p138).

I regard myself as a member of the indigenous population of North East England; as a 'Geordie', given that I was born in Newcastle upon Tyne and that a 'real Geordie' is from the banks of the

River Tyne. My culture is developed from my working-class background - my father worked for forty years in the shipyards, and his father before him, for example, but also from a profound sense of historical development, a feel for the historic streets and alleyways of Newcastle, a grasp of the Northumbrian landscape, its border history, the shape of the Tyne and the coastal seascape. There is a real pride here but, if you're not careful, an insularity and a narrow tribalism. I have tried to resist this, to delve into my region's history with open eyes, to learn from the past but to progress, to live in the Global Village.

No matter how internationalist, how visionary, one's perspective is, however, one cannot resist a burning anger when the indigenous population is overwhelmed by outside forces. Some years ago, I remember talking to the film-maker Gary Chaplin, born and bred in the North East, specifically Spennymoor, and the grandson of the famous novelist Sid Chaplin. He told me how at meetings of film-makers working in the North East, no doubt deciding on grant allocations, he was left as the only 'Geordie' present with a feeling of tremendous isolation. Look at Northern Arts officers and a local might come away with the same feeling. For there sometimes seems nothing quite as arrogant as the middle-class 'professionals'' in their overriding of the indigenous culture, its history and its wounds. This is not unique to the North East, of course. It is the 'arts for arts sake' brigade, the disconnection of creative expression from the

social reality which surrounds it, the failure to link the present with the past, and, often enough, the appropriation of the local folk-culture by the rootless middle-classes, the rendering of it as harmless and quaint.

"Had we more faith in ourselves, and were more sure of our values, we would have less need to rely on the images and monuments of the past. We would also find that, far from being useless except as a diversion from the present, the past is indeed a cultural resource, that the ideas and values of the past - as in the Renaissance - can be the inspiration for fresh creation. But because we have abandoned our critical faculty for understanding the past, and have turned history into heritage, we no longer know what to do with it, except obsessively preserve it" (Hewison, p138).

As Hewison points out, the creation of Beamish Museum has occurred at the same time as the life of the North East was being destroyed. "It is no longer an educational resource or the repository of memory: it is an employer, and an economic asset as a tourist attraction. As industries die, the heritage solution is increasingly applied" (ibid). And in 'Catherine Cookson Country' the fact that the street where she was born was demolished years ago has not prevented the development of a Cookson tourist trail, including the building of a replica of the street of her birth! Oh for a Geordie Zamyatin!

Antonio Gramsci wrote that "If the cultural world for which one struggles in a living and necessary fact ... it will find its

artists" (quoted in Parkinson, Poetry in the North East, p121, 1972). Parkinson hopes that a new generation of writers "will find the means to express the impulse and experience of the region and produce a literature of repute, based on the best of folk tradition and continuing the high level of achievement represented by the novels of Sid Chaplin" (Parkinson, Poetry in the North East, 1972).

Alan Myers, in his 'Literary Guide to the North East' (Second Edition, 1997), asserts that "a resistance movement is overdue", in order to celebrate our regional identity and its long tradition in opposition to a centrist, metropolitan obsession. "For a city like Newcastle, with a thousand years of history, to have only a single literary plaque (to Jack Common, in Heaton), is surely carrying the Geordie detestation of 'the porridge of outside show' too far" (ibid). Perhaps we should be looking forward to a cultural renaissance, in what we might call 'Jack Common Country'.

Chapter 3. WHAT DOES 'INDIGENOUS' MEAN?

"My mother and my father
scraped and saved for me,
bruised each other in the process,
gave up smoking and the sea.

Try to understand me,
why I've come back to earth;
it's because I need to know myself
and the landscape of my birth."

(Keith Armstrong)

At a meeting of the Executive Committee of the national Federation of Worker-Writers and Community Publishers I was asked, after having attempted to explain my commitment to 'regional culture', what I meant by 'indigenous' in this context. This surprised me in the sense that I had presumed this was a pretty well accepted term which should have been understood in an organisation such as the F.W.W.C.P. which as a 'federal' body should be accountable to, indeed driven by, its grass-roots membership.

'Indigenous', to me, relates to those people who are born and bred in a particular locality and whose culture and traditions go back through generations. In my case this specifically connects with the North East of England, its people, communities, history and landscape; and, even more specifically, it connects with

Tyneside, the City of Newcastle upon Tyne and the district of Heaton, in Newcastle, where I was born and grew up.

This is not just an issue of locality, of course. There are a number of complex issues at work here but, it seems to me, the most significant is that of 'class'. "In recent years, the concept of class has come under increasing scrutiny as a means of explaining both the present and the past. The reasons for this lie in the profound economic, political, and intellectual changes marking our time. Class is seen by some to be unequal to the task of explaining our present reality" (Joyce, Introduction to 'Class', 1995, p3). In my view, and indeed that of, perhaps, the majority, the validity of class as a means of understanding the nature of North East England and beyond is not in question. "For many ... the degree of social change in the present is seen to be exaggerated" (ibid).

In many ways, the recent cultural heritage of the North East is rooted in the mining, shipbuilding and engineering industries and the sense of 'community' and culture which has developed out of this. It is this background from which I hail. A background which gave me a sense of belonging, of continuity through generations, of loyalty and pride in what has been achieved through work and struggle and a strong identity with my own city, reflected through an understanding of its long history and an identification with its football team, for example. This, of course, is a reflection of one's upbringing, the feeling of closeness to the landscape of the River Tyne induced by frequent trips along its banks as a child and the sense of awe which one

felt when boarding a ship which your own father, in a small way, had helped to build. But it is also indicative of a kind of rebelliousness which, to me, has only been enhanced by the recent political devastation of the region by the Conservative government and its marketing allies.

'Indigenous culture' has in it the stirrings of autonomy, a claim to govern one's own lives and to fight for this right through an understanding of your region's historical struggle against the forces of the centralised state, its multi-national partners, and the cultural imperialism of the ruling-classes. There is, in my own case, and often enough in many of the indigenous population of the North East, an identification with Celtic aspirations and reality, reflected in an identity with, for example, the Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 and 1745. This is in keeping no doubt with our position on the borders of Scotland and the turbulent border history reflected in families like my own. I think it generally true to say that there is a greater stirring of the North East heart when travelling North to Scotland than in journeying South to London - though, in official railway parlance, one boards the 'up' train to London and the 'down' train to Newcastle. Most 'Geordies' would have this switched around.

It is our location to the North Sea, and the history which goes with it, as well as the Ferry service and other cultural links, which makes people in the North East turn to Scandinavia and Europe, perhaps in a similar way to the historical European links which Scotland has developed; much stronger than imperialist England, which seems happier to face America, certainly in the

extreme case of Margaret Thatcher. This is not to say that there is not, in many cases, a negative insularity in the North East and an entrenched tribalism which needs to be fought and consistently challenged. Such tribalism is, however, understandable, given that the North East has so often felt under siege by forces outside of its control and with no real accountability, politically or democratically.

At the same time, 'Geordies' are English, if a volatile and mixed-up grouping within the umbrella of 'England'. To this extent there are great tensions at work between the identification with the Nation and its State and Monarchy, and perhaps more republican aspirations, even if the latter are not, normally, clearly formulated. What fifteen years of Conservative rule have contributed to is the breaking down of such national loyalties by the erosion of national and public institutions in the name of 'market forces'. Not only has this severely damaged, in an abhorently undemocratic way, the historic birthright of the North East, it has sown, I would suggest, the seeds of regional discontent and prepared for the inevitable disintegration of the United Kingdom and the few remaining vestiges of British imperialism.

Western economies have been restructured to switch emphasis from the manual and industrial sector, moving from the old manual 'working class' towards a so-called 'post-industrial' society. This has inevitably fractured traditional hierarchies and outlooks. "The result has been not only a numerical decline of the manual working class, but the declining significance of

manual work, and work in general, certainly of work as a fairly stable, uniform, lifelong experience. These changes cannot be without considerable effect on people's sense of collective and personal identity. The shift in employment and investment from production to consumption industries has been paralleled by the rise of consumption itself as an arena in which people's desires and hopes are centred" (Joyce, p3).

These changes raise a multiplicity of cultural and, indeed, moral and spiritual issues. Do we accept that these developments are the inevitable path of 'progress', an indication of the necessary 'end of history' - or do we view them, in part at least, as the imposition of the economic will of largely outside forces on the indigenous population? The restructuring of Western economies does not mean, for example, that we do not need coal as an energy resource, simply that it can be got cheaper, often enough, by exploiting slave labour elsewhere in the world. So that any vision of a more federalist, more regional society must be grounded in a world-view and not only on a purely local one.

"What matters is not the past, but our relationship with it. As individuals, our security and identity depend largely upon the knowledge we have of our personal and family history; the language and customs which govern our social lives rely for their meaning on a continuity between past and present. Yet at times the pace of change ... are so radical that ... there is the threat of total rupture with our past lives. While a hold on the past is weakened, confidence in the value of the social identity that comes from a secure past is also undermined" (Hewison, The

Heritage Industry, 1987 p43). This is obviously true of the North East but it is not through mere nostalgia that we can progress. It seems to me that we must maintain a continuity with the past so that we understand our own history in more detail and grow from a deep knowledge of its strengths and drawbacks. We must see local history not in a purely narrow way, as many local history societies do, but in global terms, with an understanding of the complexity of the various social and economic forces which interact to forge events. We have only to look at the rise of the redoubtable Sir John Hall to illustrate this point. Sir John, of course, is of mining stock but went on to work for the National Coal Board in its Estates Department which armed him no doubt with the nous to exploit the property market enabling him to establish the Metro Centre and to acquire Wynyard Hall, the former residence of the 'scourge' of the Durham Miners in the nineteenth century, Lord Londonderry. Walk through Durham City and you will see in its Market Place the statue of Lord Londonderry mounted on a horse. Sir John has also recently purchased the Durham Wasps ice hockey team and moved it to Newcastle, despite considerable local protest. What I am driving at here is that these ironies and incongruities are lost on us if we do not understand our history and, indeed, simply walk past without noticing - we cannot develop in the present, without understanding our past. On a simple level, how many people in Newcastle upon Tyne walk past Grey's Monument without knowing anything of the man who introduced the Reform Bill of 1832, giving almost all of the middle classes the vote (males, that is),

and anti-slavery legislation? This historical understanding should be an essential part of our education, but, usually, isn't.

In his book 'Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia' (1979), Fred Davis asserts that nostalgia should be construed as not just a craving for the past but a response to the nature of the present. "Nostalgia is felt most strongly at a time of discontent, anxiety or disappointment, yet the times for which we feel nostalgia most keenly were often themselves periods of disturbance" (Hewison, The Heritage Industry, 1987, p45). Michael Wood noted in 1974 that "what nostalgia mainly suggests about the present is not that it is catastrophic or frightening, but that it is undistinguished, unexciting, blank. There is no life in it, no hope, no future ... It is a time going nowhere, a time that leaves nothing for our imagination to do except plunge into the past" (New Society, 7/11/74). There is a conservatism inherent in 'nostalgia', of which Thatcher's evocation of 'Victorian values' is but one recent example. However, it is not without its adherents on the Left also: "the emergence of an urban proletariat has led to memories of community and class solidarity which are summoned up to confront contemporary conflicts and defeats" (Hewison, The Heritage Industry, 1987, p47). In advocating a deeper understanding of our indigenous culture's history, we have to take a critical and analytical stance if we are to face the reality; the pitfalls and the joy. "The question is ... what kind of past we have chosen to preserve, and what that has done to our present" (ibid).

I recently researched and wrote a sequence of short poems on the theme of the Hexham Riot of 1761 (Northern Voices, 1996). The poems were performed, with tunes of the Northumbrian Pipes, on March 9th of this year, on the actual date of the Riot's 235th anniversary. Fifty-one people were killed on that day when the North Yorkshire Militia opened fire on a crowd which had assembled in Hexham's Market Place to protest against new draft laws for the nation's militia. My motivation in addressing this theme was to raise awareness of the event since there is no plaque or memorial to it in Hexham, and to reclaim it from this obscurity as an important date in our history, not likely to be celebrated by the twin forces of heritage and tourism. This element of reclaiming our history is fundamental to an engaged interaction between past, present and future. It requires a re-analysis of the imperialist history of England, a return to regional roots and identity which requires both a detailed look at the past from a local and international perspective, a perspective which also addresses the issues of class, gender and race, for example. Despite the need to understand our indigenous roots, we must be aware of living in a multi-cultural world.

The growing popularity of 'World Music' is to me an encouraging sign and obviously connects with any resurgence in North East culture. What might be troubling is an apolitical approach to world culture. To me, creative expression occurs in a social and political context, not in an artistic vacuum. To this extent, I am interested in an engaged creativity. It is this which is missing from many of our Folk Clubs and the like in the present

climate. The regional organisation 'Folkworks' is a prime example, existing in a sponsored neutral world where it is dangerous to get involved in political activity, even to mark an important aspect of local history, such as the Hexham Riot. I am not denying that 'Folkworks' encouragement of young musicians to develop the craft of playing their instruments is extremely useful. What I am troubled by is the neutering of our culture by dissociating the music from the social events which nurtured it. How many more events must we endure which have no links with contemporary themes or issues? How many Irish fiddle concerts with no sense of engagement with 'the Troubles'?

A year or two ago, with the encouragement of Newcastle Trades Council, I brought together a wide range of local poets to perform together at a festival against racism. This was a rare event, but a refreshing change from the usual bland 'one-man' literary presentations where the usually somewhat tortured individual reads from his or her book. The issue of 'class', of course, cannot be discounted in this scenario. For the example of 'Folkworks' and its literary counterparts, such as 'Bloodaxe Books' in Newcastle, are also indications of the complex class-based conflicts at work. Both 'Folkworks' and 'Bloodaxe' are largely unaccountable outfits who rely on state subsidy for their survival. Their output does not in general respond to the aspirations of the majority of local people or to ongoing events. 'Folkworks' has a cultural neutrality at its core, which leads it to entertain schemes of sharing premises with the Northern Sinfonia. In the sense that my understanding of 'folk-culture' is

of a music born out of struggle and hardship in many instances, it seems to me that 'Folkworks' avoids such conflict. It would appear that 'Folkworks' draws the line between 'folk' and 'popular' music - surely there is a cross-over here. And those individuals who manage both 'Folkworks' and 'Bloodaxe' seem in themselves rootless. Neil Astley, who began 'Bloodaxe' has no other association with Newcastle than that of having studied English at its University and hails, in fact, from Portchester in England's deep South, though he is not averse to making great play of his recently acquired regional roots, occasionally publishing the odd book with a local connection. He has gathered inspiration from the work of Tyneside-born Basil Bunting, a guru-poet for many of the 'literati'. Indeed, 'Bloodaxe' derives its name from a legendary Viking chief who spared someone's head in exchange for a poem - and so a mythology was born! The middle-class articulateness of these administrators puts them in a dominant position, especially in the acquisition of Northern Arts and Arts Council grants on which they thrive. I am not saying that useful work is not from time to time produced by 'Folkworks' and 'Bloodaxe' but I do believe that their cultural links are somewhat tenuous and they evince only a narrow awareness of the North East's history and culture.

An issue which also raises itself here is that of the professionalising of the Arts and the kind of careerism which permeates the hierarchical structures of institutions such as Northern Arts and the Arts Council. This contempt, in many cases, for the 'amateur' has an elitism at its core and a disregard for

the concerns of the 'common man'. It is the same kind of centralist elitism which decides on 'standards', which distinguishes between 'high' and 'low' art, between 'the Queen's English' and the 'coarseness' of the vernacular and dialect. As I have said myself, 'a song-bird does not require an Arts Council grant in order to sing'. It is here where the local voice is important, perhaps relatively inarticulate but, nevertheless, as valid and as meaningful as that of the, oft-out-of-touch, so-called 'professional'.

It seems that the Arts Administrator has acquired greater social prestige than those struggling artists, 'professional' or otherwise, on whom they rely for their posts. This 'prestige', of course, is dependent upon them being prepared to accommodate any shift in government policy and to go along with the machinations of the multitude of quangos set up by it. Naturally, they will deal with those artists who are prepared to 'toe the same line'. Hence we have the prospect of Visual Arts UK, a 'towards the Millennium' concept, the brainchild of former Arts Council Chairman, Peter Palumbo, slavishly put into operation by the Northern Arts Board and its thirty-three Local Arts Development 'satellites' in local government. And so the prospect of the sixty-five foot 'Angel', in my opinion, a singularly bland specimen lacking in craft and not remotely connected to the needs of the people of Gateshead many of whom resent its imposition (after all, it is their lottery money, and the rest, which pays for it) by a local Labour council who once had plans for a motorway through the town's Saltwell Park, virtually the only

green area relieving the bleakness, and who accepted, when Newcastle wouldn't, the somewhat garish boat which operates as a Night Club under the Tyne Bridge. These renowned philistines are now the Northern Electric champions of 'the Arts', fêted by the Northern Arts bureaucracy as artistic 'Crusaders' leading the people of Gateshead to greater things, creating a sculptural extravaganza for tourists and Executives to drool over. A local humbly suggested, instead of the 'Angel', a statue of Thomas Hepburn, the renowned Miners' leader - this, of course, was history, dead, buried, not an image for the future.

Alan Myers, in his article 'W.H. Auden and the North' (Northern Review, Vol. 2, 1995, p45-61), refers to an anecdote related by novelist Paul Bailey about a meeting between the North East writer Sid Chaplin and Auden. Chaplin said that he too wrote and Auden responded with "Oh, I see, a regional author". Chaplin was left speechless. It is this attitude which still prevails in many circles - the equation of regionalism, parochialism, provincialism; in other words, narrowness, insularity, introspectiveness. It cannot be denied that there is evidence of such an attitude quite frequently but this need not prevail in the future. There is hope - hope in a 'Europe of the Regions', for example; lessons to be learned from Catalonia and elsewhere. The film-maker Peter Watkins has said recently "I'm not sure how I feel about nationalism but pride in one's own culture and roots is very important" (The Guardian, 11/4/96). The Chancellor of the University of Durham, Sir Peter Ustinov, has also stated, referring to Switzerland, that it is "a country that has united

without losing its regionalism. The regions are brutal about each other but when outsiders attack the country they cling together like a rock. That's what Europe should be like, each area should keep its personality" (European Magazine, 11-17/4/96).

"The most important [message] is that one cannot stop groups of human beings from considering themselves to be a people, a race or a culture, however demonstrably absurd their claims might be. The accepted reaction of branding such instincts as ... reprehensible is not only indefensible, it is stupid. It is also doomed to be ineffective. We had better learn this lesson quickly" (Adam Zamoysky, The Guardian, 18/8/95). Professor Christopher Harvie, in his book 'Cultural Weapons' (Polygon, 1992), speaking of Scotland, asserts that "if [it] is going to survive in Europe it shouldn't just copy institutions in, say, Germany. It should find out the points where, through drawing on its strengths, and combating its weaknesses, it can fit itself into the most critical areas of change in Europe". He goes on to suggest that "before we thought about organising Scotland's economy we worked out in our imagination where we were supposed to fit into Europe, and what sort of country we wanted Scotland to be ... My fear is that what we could see in our 'new Europe' isn't society but private wealth and private proverty, both of them creeping away into their own habitations to die. This while we have the resources to <u>think</u> collectively, and therefore create something far better?" Surely, these points can find resonances in North East England. As David Byrne has argued, "the terrain of culture is a crucial place for the battles (about how life goes)

which have to be fought if we are not to have a world which combines blindness with barbarism on the new American model". He poses the question of how can the strengths of a North East culture of "such historic significance ... be translated into a programme of transformation for the future?" He points to the example of Scotland where there exists "a political culture in civil society which is separate from the political machine" pointing to, and particularly relevant to Glasgow, "a thriving cultural scene drawing in a most unparasitic way on the distinctive class and industrial origins of contemporary Scottishness" and reinforcing "a national project in a way which is the complete antithesis of traditional exclusionary nationalism" (Northern Review, Vol. 1, 1995, p27-34). The North East could also be part of a similar project which, as Harvie suggests, "is about how people understand and run a smallish community, without exploiting anyone" (Harvie, Cultural Weapons, 1992, p114).

Chapter 4. CANNY CRACK: REGIONALISM AND COMMUNITY ARTS IN THE NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND

> "Remember it is a canny toon - 'canny Newcassel' they call it ... Whenever you can't understand a word of the conversation around you, you are probably in a canny spot" (Jack Common).

The academic John Osmond recently articulated a key question, namely: "Why when [English] regional feelings are so strong, their political representation is so weak?" He emphasised the regional identities 'underpinning' Englishness "demonstrated by the wealth and variation of regional landscapes, industrial cultures, accent and attitudes contained within the country" (Borderlands, Supplement to New Statesman, June 1992, p29).
What accepted divisions of England there are are fired by economic rather than the broad-based cultural concerns that provide Scotland and Wales with a more significant coherence. In the North East of England, the Campaign for a Northern Assembly has striven to make an impact against the tide of what Osmond describes as "the combined economic and cultural hegemony of London, together with the significantly named Home Counties and their intellectual outposts, Oxford and Cambridge" (ibid). He goes on to describe "English regionalism as like a dog that has failed to bark. That it might do so is the hope of a strange assortment of threatened local authorities, English political romantics, Euro-enthusiasts, sober-suited northern businessmen,

Liberal Democrat federalists, and frustrated, mainly Labour, northern politicians. In an era of the Europe of the regions, they may find common cause". Some years ago, Nye Bevan, in his book 'In Place of Fear', described the House of Commons as "the most unrepresentative of representative assemblies ... an elaborate conspiracy to prevent the real clash of opinion which exists outside from finding an appropriate echo within its walls ... a social shock absorber placed between privilege and the pressure of popular discontent". What this implied then and implies more especially today is that politicians must give power back to the people, "that people should no longer depend on government but on themselves" (Melanie Phillips, The Observer, 27/7/97). This requires a move away from 'the top-down organisational structure of government' with relevance not just to Scottish devolution but for local Labour councils as well, with the devolvement of services to the community wherever possible and the breaking up of 'one-party states' within local government; the task of politicians being to 'support and empower people in their communities'. The reliance on elections to Parliament and to local councils to confer legitimacy and accountability is no longer sufficient - 'participative democracy' is more appropriate with power in the hands of tenants and local people. This is particularly true in the area of 'Community Arts' which has at its core the notion of empowerment through the development of creative skills in the community.

There are several examples of regional government available to us. Perhaps the most appropriate is that of Germany which has a

similar population, area, culture and infrastructure. Its federal structure was planned in detail by the wartime British government in order to prevent the rise of another Nazi state. An important result of this is that each Lander (or regional state) has developed its own fairly independent economy with economic planning and promotion of industrial development carried out by the Land authority, while the Land bank services the needs of the land and ploughs back the profits into the local economy. "The German federal system provides a model for regional government which might be applied to the UK both as a basis for economic recovery and in the interests of the extension of democracy" (Tyne Wear 2000 document, 1987).

In his 'The Rise of Regional Europe' Christopher Harvie asks if in the future some form of federalism is both possible and practical, especially in the English regions, in order to stabilise the situation in the UK and to integrate it with European institutions; Britain being the only substantial state within the European communities which has no regional legislatures.

The dismantling by the Conservative government of the English regional economic councils and the withdrawal of many powers from local authorities exacerbated the discontent in the North East and other regions of England as well as in the 'stateless nations' of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where people resented being dominated by a government which drew most of its votes from 'South of the M25'. According to the Conservative perspective regions are a concept which might exist in Europe but

not in England. They are, however, not entirely alone in such attitude, given that similar views are held by 'the liberal left metropolitan intelligentsia' as well as some nationalists in Scotland.

An editorial in the New Statesman and Society in 1995 criticised "blithe talk" about English regions, arguing that "there is little evidence of strong, coherent, regional feelings". According to NSS, organisations such as the Campaign for a Northern Assembly, actively promoting the case for regional government, are confused about identities and boundaries and are therefore, by definition, misguided. The English tradition, it is argued, is one of "intense localism" and "must be uncoupled from that of a Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly".

The Scottish nationalist commentator David McCrone (Regional Studies, Vol. 27, No. 6, quoted in Tomaney, J., Northern Economic Review, No. 23, Summer 1995, p3-23) asserts that the Labour Party was misguided in the 1992 general election to subsume Scottish and Welsh devolution into a broader package of constitutional reform which also includes the creation of English regional government. "Such a view", according to McCrone, "ignores real differences between (weak) English regionalism and (strong) Celtic nationalism". Alex Salmond, the leader of the Scottish Nationalist Party, has criticised "the folly of Labour's approach in mixing up the national case for a Scottish parliament with the regional case of English assemblies" (Glasgow Herald, 10/2/95). The journalist Neal Ascherson maintains that the splitting up of England into regions is a "polite evasion of England's existence"

(Independent on Sunday, 24/11/91). According to John Tomaney, "what these conservatives, liberal-left and nationalist positions share in common is a refusal to acknowledge the social, political and cultural diversity of English regional life" (Northern Economic Review, No. 23, 1995, p3-23). However, he argues, "the North East has a particular culture, born of its relative physical isolation over hundreds of years, but recast and reinforced by a particular experience of industrialisation and deindustrialisation, the legacy of which is the basis for a shared set of contemporary socio-economic problems and possibilities" (ibid). The most significant factor in North East culture is the strongly developed tradition of collective feeling and solidarity which, whilst rooted in many ways in the industrial heritage of the region, has still its own autonomy and continues to exist long after the old industries have been shut down. As Ascherson himself has put it the North East is: "geographically well defined, culturally at least as much in touch with Scotland as with England, politically conscious as a place which votes Labour and gets Tory government from London" (Independent on Sunday, 24/11/91).

Economic decline, allied to the loss of Empire, has "undermined the ways akin - although obviously not identical - to growing Scottish doubts about the value of the Union. The Thatcherite post-industrial project has further strengthened the sense of the North East's separateness ... In fact through the instrument of quangos - part of the reconstituted regional state - this inappropriate agenda of the 'enterprise culture' of heroic

entrepreneurs and economic future based on shopping, has been foisted on the North East" (Tomaney, Northern Economic Review, No. 23, 1995, p3-23).

George Monbiot asserts that "the ability to challenge the state's authority, reclaiming politics from the politicians, is good for the state, as well as society" (The Guardian, 29/8/96). He goes on to liken society to "an amoeba", i.e. moving from the margins, not the centre. "Cut off from its margins, the state can only sclerotise and shrivel, becoming ever less responsive to change". The invented idea of Britishness which has bound things together for almost four hundred years is at last breaking down, the requirements of empire have disappeared and the Union is dissolving. Gone is the authority and appeal of the main institutions of the crown, church, Westminster and the welfare state. Jonathan Freedland, in a commentary on the devolution recently (The Guardian, 28/8/97), emphasised that: "older Scots may have memories of Britain as more than an abstract entity - with the second world war the obvious example - but for a younger generation the very word 'Britain' lacks meaning". This is also true, he says, of the English football fans who carry the St George flag rather than a Union Jack - "they are simply shaking off Britishness - which, polls show, barely half of us see as an important part of our identity - replacing it with a national allegiance closer to home". A new Scotland will mean goodbye to an old Britain - "one that is vanishing before our eyes".

The playwright Colin Welland describes the North as having "been left drained of its capacity, its individual dignity, its

creative impulse. Denuded of their manufacturing base - in my younger days, their pride - great cities such as Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield are now mere fringes of the metropolis, finding wealth in fripperies, in light, namby-pambying industry, in financial dealings, in service" (The Observer, 24/11/96). He could equally be painting a recent picture of the North East of England. Now, Welland says, there is "no steel, no shipbuilding, no ports, no mines, no mills, no clothing factories, no industry to which we can nail our colours and say: that's us, that's what we do, that's what we're here for. Robbed of this self-worth, this uniqueness, the cities of the North are fast becoming little Londons, hotbeds of all we used to hold in contempt".

Thatcherism represented a crudely populist doctrine which embodied an aggressive and uncompromising commitment to individualism. "It was the first dominant philosophy in modern times not to have at its heart the idea of selflessness and service. And it decisively changed the national character" (Jeffrey Richards, The Guardian, 15/8/97). Thatcher herself possessed no understanding of community and little sense of tolerance or humour. She had contempt for the idea of public service. According to Richards we have three choices: to descend into "the unrestrained individualism of Thatcherite philosophy"; to become even greater consumers of American culture in a homogenised world where national identity is eliminated (in short, the kind of world which Orwell, Leavis and Hoggart have warned about); or to return to the old idea of the national character where 'the sense of duty and stoicism, but also

community and humour, are there in abundance". In such a world, "full employment, law and order, good manners, efficient public services, community spirit, decency, duty and social concern" would be valued concepts, albeit idealised. These concepts are based not just on a recalled golden age but also constitute an imagined future, free of the perceived ills dogging our society - ills such as violence, greed, squalor and inequality.

Anthony Giddens accepts that the 'new individualism' is not going to disappear but insists that "the aspiration for a more participatory society is still very much alive" (New Statesman, 30/12/94). Whilst traditional communities are gone forever, he argues, "new forms of social solidarity, cohesion and civic culture" can be sought. This ties in with the feeling that there is a strong need for renewal in our society, for a reconstructed civic culture expressing "a need to redevelop organic connections between the past and the future and to reintegrate the generations".

In considering such aspirations, however, we should not think of Britain, or indeed England, as an undifferentiated mass. As Tomaney points out, "there is real political, social, economic and cultural diversity amongst the English regions" (Northern Economic Review, No. 23, 1995, p3-23), but the fabric of the regions is under severe strains. It is only if we seek to nourish the regional culture, which, despite its broken material base is still inclined to the virtues of solidarity and collectivism, that we can creatively confront the drastic consequences of deindustrialisation. For, as Osmond has stated: "Cultural

resources of the kind that exist in the North East are like wheels set spinning by a previous generation that could stop in the next" (Borderlands, Supplement to New Statesman, June 1992, p29).

A sense of regional identity may be crucial if, as Melanie Phillips has suggested, England is "squeezed by a pincer movement" with devolution to Scotland and Wales on the one hand and European union on the other (The Observer, 11/12/94). In these circumstances, English identity will be confronted. "It is those who deprive the working classes of the means to connect with their English identity who create racism" (ibid). We should see Englishness as polyglot and not monolithic; a culture which has nurtured concepts of liberty, tolerance and scepticism, to place emphasis on the positive aspects of its history. Equally, 'Geordie' culture is not an exclusive and insular culture; many Geordies are well travelled, particularly in pursuit of work and the North East region has accommodated a strong Irish Catholic community, for example, avoiding much of the sectarianism prevalent elsewhere. As Colls and Lancaster affirm in the Preface to their book 'Geordies': 'Geordie culture is generous and has drawn, and continues to draw, on the generosity of other cultures" (Geordies, 1992).

Regionalism is an antidote to the rise of powerful and anonymous 'market forces' which have destabilised areas such as the North East. It represents a counter-offensive offering the opportunity of re-establishing what Will Hutton describes as "the humanities of a club, family and community" (The State We're In, 1995).

Where the instinct to do this joins forces with an already existing nationalism or regional identity, "the demand for institutions of self-government responsive to local needs is irresistible" (ibid). The region and its people require control over resources. This is where Community Arts links in - with people expressing themselves in their own ways creatively, empowering themselves, building self-confidence in their own skills and their local cultural identity, and acquiring the material means in terms of buildings, equipment etc to achieve this. In a North East with scarcely anything remaining of its heavy industries, what can such creativity be founded on?

> "Though the waves the shores are lashing,
> our strength will always bind us,
> and the love will always guide us
> in our hearts.
> We will survive the loss and heartache,
> the ups and downs of fortune,
> while the boats bob all around us
> in the Wear."
>
> (Keith Armstrong)

Robert Colls sees the North East as "a knowable imagined community" (Northern Review, Vol. 1, Spring 1995, p9-26) and looks forward to a federation of the regions in opposition to the absolutism of the centralised nation-state. This would lead to the reclamation of the North East's resources, both material and

human, away from the centre with even a 'Northern Arc' redeveloping historic trade routes with Ireland, Scotland, Scandinavia, the Baltic and Russia. Like Joseph Cowen, the nineteenth century political activist, he sees the North East people as "the makers of wealth and the bearers of his hopes", refusing to accept the dominant versions of Englishness where working-class people were strangers in their own country while other people ran the place" (Colls & Lancaster, Preface to 'Geordies', 1992). 'Geordies' are seeing fresh prospects and thinking laterally about their relationship to a new Europe, away from the draining effect of the South East.

Because English provincial government hasn't been tried, this is no reason to write it off. The reluctance to implement it hitherto is as much to do with a lack of political imagination, as well as the vindictiveness of previous Conservative governments. A continuation of centralisation in Britain will make it "the sick man of a united Europe" (Harvie, The Rise of Regional Europe, 1994). As a campaigning Cornishman said recently: "We just want our fair share of investment. I don't want my kids to have to leave Cornwall to find work". He and his fellow marchers are also demanding a university campus and Cornish history, culture and language taught in schools. And in Italy there are moves to give the regions power over public works, agriculture, transport, posts and telecommunications, industry, employment, health, education and arts, with the right to raise their own taxes and decide how they should be governed. Perhaps the tide is turning.

As Christopher Harvie says in his Preface to 'Poetry in the British Isles: Non-Metropolitan Perspectives': "the paradox of the regional lyric is its intellectual and emotional centrality. Its range of concerns cannot simply be rendered as the self-satisfactions of individualism or nationalism. It goes out from an essentially political community concerned about its definitions, where its boundaries actually are, while the 'national' presupposes that people think in a particular way because they are who they are. The regional is concerned about the civic, and the civic about universals: what people believe and how they act, and where this intersects with communal identity and environment". It is this kind of dynamic that will create a federal Britain. "As more and more British regions insist on similar arrangements for themselves, the kind of powers delegated to Scotland will become generalised, transforming the role of Westminster and Whitehall, but also the character of Britain's economic and social structures" (ibid).

"One of the great drivers of inequality in Britain - the privileged position of the Home Counties - would thus be challenged as the region became one of many with no special reason to be privileged" (Will Hutton, The State We're In, 1995). In a new 'Europe of the Regions', the North East would become part of the European North West as well as an English North East. This would present opportunities for the region to express itself both politically and culturally in the new era. "Only by telling its own stories will the region get a sense of the whole, and only by making sense of the whole will it know what to represent.

Art is socially useful ... It is the doing which helps people to see where they are and what they value" (Colls, Geordies, Eds. Colls & Lancaster, 1992, Chapter 1, p1-34). By expressing themselves in their own way, through Community Arts, people in the North East "could claim their right to be in a wider world".

Chapter 5. THE CLOTH-CAP AND 'THE NEW GREAT NORTH': CLASS AND CHANGE IN 'GEORDIELAND'

'Once Aa met a Tory,
doon in Jarra toon,
man, he looked sae lonely,
had nae marras roond'.

"The question 'what sort of future' in 'Geordieland' is about where we are going. We need to begin by remembering where we are coming from. It is easy to identify the overwhelming collectivist and socialist objectives of the people of the Northern region. However easy that identification is, it is also absolutely necessary to establish because the present economic and political trends run directly counter to those objectives" (David Byrne, Geordies, Eds. Colls & Lancaster, Chapter 2, p35-62, 1992).
Also in 'Geordies', Paul L. Younger talks of his return to the North East of England after a period in America (Chapter 10, Coda, p168-178, 1992). Delving into the heritage of Northumbria, he identifies with it "as a distinctive land and people who have grown together through struggle", and "even though the poverty of Tyneside stood out in relief from [his] new perspective, [he] began to feel genuinely fortunate at having been born there, just in time to experience a Tyneside of shipyards and pits, the industries we built our identity around". But what, on returning to his beloved region, he was "brought down to earth with a bump", a severe dose of reality tarnished

"the romance of history, where hardship and struggle can seem noble". He was shocked by the devastation around him, saw "the final annihilation of the shipyards"; the demolition of the colliery in his home town; his father, relatives, friends either on the dole or living in constant fear of it.

"The traditionally minded majority of Tyneside, who maintain their beliefs in communitarian principles and retain some pride in their identity as a worthwhile people, were and are well and truly under attack" (ibid).

There has been a drastic shift in investment and employment away from production towards consumption "paralleled by the rise of consumption itself as an arena in which people's desires and hopes are centred ... The rise of the right and of neo-liberalism have brought with them ideologies in which the solidarities of class, with its communitarian sentiments, have retreated before the rhetoric of privacy, choice, freedom, and the individual" (Joyce, Introduction to 'Class', 1995, p1).

Throughout Britain, and especially in the North East, quangos and local authorities have fallen over backwards to compensate for these changes in the regional economies, spending millions each year to promote their own areas, "desperate to beggar their neighbours in the jobs stakes and to capture for themselves that scarce bit of mobile inward investment to boost their ailing economies. Nice work for the public relations companies and lobbyists if they can get it - and they frequently can. Some £14m of Merseyside's 'Objective One' European grant monies have been set aside for improving the region's image. Nowhere has a longer

pedigree in this kind of public relations than the North East, where the image business is big business, and accentuating the positive and downplaying the negative a fine art" (Davis, Up Your North, Trade Films, 1996, Script Proposal).

In this way there has been a marked effort to market the North East in such a way that its cultural and industrial character is played down in order to be a more appealing investment. The public relations men have thus portrayed the region's wares as consisting of "cheap, non-militant, if not docile, labour; bags of incentives for incoming investors and industries; a gateway to Europe for the Americas and Far Easterners - and, in doing so, it has covered up ... its very vulnerable backside" (ibid). The image-makers are concerned to point out the past which they perceive as ugly and out-dated and not only that, according to Bob Davis, they "have conspired in the obliteration of its concrete reality. Try to find a pit-heap or a shipyard nowadays - no sooner closed (with no great part played in their defence by the image-makers) than razed to the ground. The 'modernizers' have helped to undermine the industrial culture which marked the North East out as different. And in its place they've tried to graft on a deferential, service-based culture and mentality that springs from the part-time economy that has supplanted the old order and which is a segment of the 'glocal economy' that they now embrace" (ibid).

In this scenario, 'Art' is also seen to have a part to play in sanitizing the image of the region; an image of the 'picturesque, rural, the modern if not post-modern and civilised as opposed to

grimy, urban, belonging to the past and prone to riots" (ibid). Sir Ron Dearing talks of "a new image of the north, not as an area of industrial decay suffering from the effects of the decline of the shipbuilding, coal and steel industries, but as an area that has had outstanding achievement in attracting the most modern and successful industries in the world; an area that far from being one of dereliction and slagheaps, is one of the most beautiful parts of the country, rich in culture, rich in history, and rich in its environment" (ibid).

This desire to cleanse the region of conflict and uncomfortable imagery is, of course, not new. In the magazine 'Ostrich', which I edited in the 1970s, I wrote: "These attitudes imply either a rejection of the traditional cultural pursuits ('the cloth-cap image') and its replacement by an emphasis on middle-class art-forms such as classical concerts and opera (with a budget weighted heavily in their favour) or, if not a total rejection, an attempt to make the traditional pursuits more attractive (note the activities of the Northumbrian Tourist Board in this direction). Thus the Newcastle Festival and bodies such as Northern Arts are much concerned with the region's 'prestige' and its 'image'. They form an indivisible link with local councils and board rooms upon whom they are in any case greatly dependent for both financial and moral support - small wonder that they tend to reflect the same attitudes - they very attitudes that have led to the destruction and/or starvation of a great deal of our local heritage and to the development of a gutless culture

remote from the community's needs" (Ostrich Magazine, July-August, 1974, p9).

In this same article, I went on to quote the following:

Edward Heath (House of Commons, 1971): "We are putting special emphasis on building up the regional organisations for the Arts because we believe that it is in this way that we shall best transform these areas".

David Dougan (then Director of Northern Arts, Annual Report, 1971-2): "This has been a remarkably buoyant year which produced ample evidence of real growth in many directions".

Jenny Lee (former Labour Minister for the Arts): "The arts Associations are definitely one of our most successful growth industries".

At the time I posed the question: "Growth and development for whose benefit?" It remains just as valid today.

"Of course, there are many for whom the utility of class has not come into question. For many of these the degree of social change in the present is seen to be exaggerated" (Joyce, Introduction to 'Class', 1995, p3).

Ken Worpole talks of the taboos that still attach themselves to the question of class, referring to it as "the wound in the national psyche that refuses to heal" (Federation of Worker Writers Magazine, Vol. 8, Autumn 1996, p2). He goes on:

"Amazingly, issues of class still won't go away. No amount of political modernisation, whether of the New Labour or 'New Times' variety, can hide the fact that aspects of class continue to fundamentally determine the quality of life-chances, as well as

the structures of feeling of millions of people in Britain today". "It is true", he says, "that class is no longer the principal driving force of socialist or social democratic politics. But its wider determinations remain pervasive and unjust ... If there is one simple thing that you can say about class it is that it is very complicated".

"But the natives aren't easily tamed", says Davis, "and there are times when the plumber's cleavage of the North East moons on to the nation at large, despite all the best efforts of the much embarrassed image makers" (Up Your North, Trade Films, 1996, Script Proposal). Despite, indeed, the new badge of Durham County Cricket Club ('A First Class County', goes the media message), based on the County Council badge, except that the crucial 'black diamonds' of coal are missing. History re-written, even blotted out, and cleansed.

Yet 'Community Arts', expressed, for example, through community publishing ventures in which I have been, and continue to be, involved in, such as 'Strong Words' and 'Northern Voices', continues to celebrate "the endurance of North East working class culture. A defiance of the new order", as Davis puts it. We might indeed ask, like Davis, "how far we have to prostrate ourselves and our identity to international capital in order to survive? And, just as if not more significantly, has the ideology of image-making and importing industry become so pervasive that it's helped scupper the coal mines and shipyards; have powerful interests colluded in 'cleansing' the region of what they, parroting the Government, see as undesirable 'smokestack'

industries inappropriate to the 'New Great North'?" (ibid).

What is at stake, and 'Community Art' is, I would argue, crucial to this, is the issue of whether or not the people of the North East are able to secure "control over their own lives and collective destiny", as David Byrne says. For him, this requires a reordering of the world economy in the long term but "for the moment it is a matter of thinking globally and acting regionally" (Geordies, Eds. Colls & Lancaster, Chapter 2, p35-52, 1992).

Paul L. Younger, with experience of the plight of the American Red Indians, quotes an unemployed shipyard welder as saying: "Geordies could end up like Red Indians, as extras in films about the North East" (Geordies, Chapter 10, p168-178, 1992). He goes on to find similarities in the problems both communities face; namely: "a feeling of isolation from the political decision-making process ...; a feeling of isolation from the dominant culture. Often it seems we will only be acceptable to those who make the rules if we abandon our language, culture and place of birth. For the sake of our human dignity, we must look at ways of defining our own cultural identity; a ravaged economy. We are now left in Northumbria with the dying remains of traditional heavy industries, ... and poorly paid jobs in the service sector". Younger points out that the Indian answer to the above problems "has seen to reclaim their right to self-determination and to re-establish their own forms of tribal government. In this process, the values of traditional Indian religion, language and culture are undergoing a renaissance". And he dreams of "Geordie self-

determination". "We've had", he says, "too many centuries of rule by pen from London. It's time that Geordie swagger counted for more than cutting a dash in the Bigg Market".

The film-maker John Mapplebeck talks of the importance of roots to his work: "Because my own father had worked at the Dean & Chapter Pit, I was attracted by the thought of rediscovering the culture of my own roots, I really found myself very much in love with a working class culture that was changing like everywhere else in the country but at a much slower rate" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997). Bringing things up to date, he finds the current situation nowhere near as marvellous as he once did: "Thatcherism destroyed those industries that underpinned that culture and people like [Sir John] Hall have put in its place a culture of fast-food and football with which I have no sympathy - I like football but I don't think there's much to be said in the way of culture. That process which was happening in the rest of the country when I first came here some thirty years ago has very much caught up with the North East. The working class culture isn't what it was. The school of very sharp Geordie wit which springs from a tradition of hard times is nowhere near as pervasive as when I first came here".

Like Bob Davis, he has suffered at the hands of the 'new image-makers': "When I worked at the B.B.C., I used to get a tremendous sort of pressure from people who wanted to get rid of what they called 'the Andy Capp image' of the North East. To some extent, a lot of my programmes were exploring the traditional history of working-class life which had not been explored very much before

and I think I was a particular anathema to these people - I find it difficult to enthuse about their vision of a new North East". This is not to say that we should not challenge what is negative and reactionary about the culture. We should celebrate the strengths but challenge severe notions of tribalism, chauvinism and insularity. As Mapplebeck says:

"I think it is important to look forward. As somebody once said, 'You can't drive a car by looking in the rear mirror to find out where you've come from'. I'm not totally against all of the development in the North East. For example, I think that Erskine's Byker Wall is one of the most important housing and social developments in Britain since the War. It's interesting that Erskine fought for that vision very much against a lot of entrenched attitudes before he finally achieved what he did". One of Mapplebeck's current projects is a Further Education television series called, 'From Marx to Metrocentre'. He sees the back-drop to this as follows: "It seems to me that the North East has been a sort of cockpit for the great divides of our century really; if you like, the divide between Marxism/Socialism on the one hand and Free Enterprise and Market Forces on the other. Because the North East is such a tight region, you can see how spectacular the battle has been".

Nigel Todd has been active in this struggle. He sees "a cultural resurgence in the North East" despite everything, but he does have reservations in over exaggerating it. "There are", he says, things which mitigate against it compared to Manchester or Glasgow or some of the other big cities in that the North East is

quite small. That means the financial underpinning of the cultural revival is more difficult to find. There's certainly a thriving area of cultural interest but it depends a bit on what you mean by 'culture'. One of the disputes in Glasgow arose when they were discussing making it a European City of Culture; the question was posed: Whose Culture? In the end, that was settled politically by referring to a culture that is essentially a middle-class, metropolitan, cosmopolitan one, rather than working-class. Anyone who touches the history of the North East very quickly discovers that there's a huge amount of material there that's never seen the light of day and never really gets the chance of a wider audience, so people are denied the opportunity of getting to know about their identity, because it's kept from them" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

He thinks that "it's a bit difficult at the moment to see expressions of a working-class culture in a sense that you could see them perhaps thirty, forty, fifty or a hundred years ago. There isn't the same expression of that through independent organisations or movements created by working-class communities like cooperatives or trade unions or whatever. What there is, tends to be heavily coloured by commercialism, working men's clubs, or the whole night-club scene or the football scene, which is now being massively reshaped by money. Clearly within it there is still a separatist working-class identity but it doesn't have a political sense of going anywhere. I don't think it knows a bit about what it's against and some of the traumas it's experienced,

but, when you look for a political expression of it, that really isn't there perhaps".

He also sees dangers inherent in an obsession with 'regionalism'. "For some people", he says, "it is a comfortable retreat from the problems of class. People who might have identified themselves in terms of the politics of class and of socialism ten or fifteen years ago, now they've grown a bit older and more comfortable, a bit more middle-aged, find it a bit harder to actually keep a focus on class and socialism, because of the defeats and setbacks we've had, and easier to slip into what they regard as something new - for some people it's post-modernism, for others it's regionalism or a blend of the two. In a way, that is very much a limited sort of luxury that some people allow themselves which like many temporary fads and fashions will eventually run up against the hard reality that Britain is a class society, no matter how it's dressed up or portrayed, the dynamics of that underpin everything and you can't escape from it ultimately".

Bill Lancaster has studied at close hand the drastic changes in the region's economy over the last two decades or so and observed their effects on the local culture:

"There are two things going on", he says. "One the one hand, you've got globalisation, with McDonald's and Burger Kings and 'Neighbours' on the telly and everything else which affects us all. Globalisation does have its good points, don't dismiss it totally out of hand - the fact that my kids seem to have an incredible understanding about what it's like to be an American Black through watching things like Oprah Winfrey on T.V., an

awful lot of benefits come out of it. On the other hand, you've got two decades of the worst government since King John where the region, to be honest, had a big kicking and it had to survive, and the way it survived was by drawing on the cultural capital. This is counter to the whole Marxist notion that culture is somehow part of the superstructure and that when you lose the economic base the cultural base collapses, that's been proved a total nonsense up here because we've lost the economic base upon which that culture was formed, i.e. mining, heavy engineering and shipbuilding, yet anybody with an ounce of perception can walk around this region and pick up very quickly the way that regional and cultural identity has actually grown over the last two decades, it's become more important to people, it's become a kind of emotional prop, a life-belt which has helped people survive. People have had to rediscover their culture because culture is something you can draw upon to give you strength, and it's a recognition of all those potentials that regional culture has which has contributed so much to the renaissance" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

For Fred Robinson, "the icons of the region have been transformed, some of them are heritage but an awful lot of them aren't. Some of the key symbols around the region these days are the Metro Centre, Nissan, Fujitsu, all this kind of stuff. They're actually new things which, basically, 'the chattering classes' don't like. There's actually a lot more forward movement than the heritage critics would wish to find there" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

He still observes "a strong concern in the region about the business of making things" and sees this kind of reindustrialisation as playing a distinctive part in the present and in the future, part of a shift from the traditional industries to new kinds of industry. But he does emphasise that it is worth bearing in mind that four fifths of the people in work in the region don't make anything at all. "If you look back, it was much more homogeneous, you understood what people did, if you saw people in the street you could guess what they did. There were only three choices: coal, shipbuilding or iron and steel. That kind of simplicity and certainty has gone and over and beyond that, of course, you've got a significant minority of people who nobody wants, nobody cares about, and who are regarded as dangerous, people who are ghettoised, the dispossessed, the underclass, however you want to describe them, and I think they are going to be with us for a very long time".

According to Bill Williamson, 'class' matters because "it connects with power in our society and how power is being exercised". But he does feel that "a lot depends on what you mean by 'class'. If you think of 'class' as a structure of inequality and social exclusion, then it is very important in the North East of England because we are polarised and there are polarisations you can see in intense forms in the North East with people who are desperately poor or unemployed living in an excluded way on council estates where there's a very high proportion of unemployed people with everything that goes with it. In that sense, 'class' is vitally important because it defines one of the

central features of the area that really has to be dealt with, analysed and altered: the structures of inequality. Class differences, with all of their cultural ramifications, have shaped much of social life in the North East, political attitudes and so on, but the older models have broken down in quite fundamental ways" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

Williamson has strong roots in mining. "My grandfather", he says, "worked in the mines all his life. He started work at the age of eleven and you couldn't get a more authentic miner than him". But this did not mean he had any illusions or sense of romance about the realities of life down the mine. As Williamson relates: "He always used to tell me that he wouldn't really feel happy until all the pits were closed. The pit he worked in finally closed in 1955 and, for him, that was the cause of some celebration, because he didn't think that people should spend their lives working underground. Within mining communities, there's always been an ambivalence towards the pit. It is gruesome work. If you read Sid Chaplin's 'Thin Seam' you don't get a romantic picture of work underground from that. It's horror, violence, degradation. But that's a different argument from losing jobs".

Williamson goes to great pains in order to combat the dangers of romanticising the real nature of the North East. In this sense, he invokes the days of the 1984-85 Miners' Strike: "It's interesting that, although the Strike was long and protracted and showed all sorts of signs of a profound solidarity with very deep roots going back into mining history, actually the cultural frame wasn't strong enough to carry the Strike forward. Had it not been

for a lot of external support, had it not been for the women in the Miners' Strike, it might have collapsed a lot earlier. As it was, it eroded from within quite badly near the end, and the notion of 'community' that was invoked as something that was going to be defended was always slightly mythical. This tendency for ordinary working people in the North East to think about the past and what was valuable in it in a nostalgic and mythologising manner worries Williamson because, in his view, "mining communities were always much more fragmented and divided within themselves than the prevailing myth would ever allow". He does not undervalue the notion of tradition but is concerned but thinks it is necessary to see through the cliches to get at the real meaning of things. He uses, as an example, the slogan on a Durham Miners' banner: 'The Past We Inherit, The Future We Build' and believes that it has "become emptied of meaning" in that "the organised Union, in Durham anyway in the more recent period, wasn't in a position to inherit the past or build the future. They didn't understand what was important about the past and there was very little view of a different sort of future".

His concern is that "the values of the people in areas of intense social exclusion have been corrupted", and he fears that "there's very little sense of collective solidarity and there's a loss of any real sense of what was once important in their lives. That's one of the tragedies, they've believed their own myths for too long". Generally, Williamson is less optimistic than some in his appraisal of the working-class tradition in the North East. Whilst he very much values the strength of his own roots and sees

this as an anchor to his life of fundamental importance, he "hasn't got any illusions about that tradition" - he thinks it's gone; "the best of it's been eroded, the worst of it has probably still to be revealed".

He goes on to develop his argument: "We all of us live in the past to some degree. We organise our lives in the present on the basis of what understanding we have of the past; we anticipate the future in terms of what understanding we have of the past, so we've all of us got to come to terms with it in some way and learn its lessons and value what's there and leave there what ought to be left there. My worry is that engagement with the past, because it's seriously important for how we live our lives, for politics, for working out what options there are in the future, is a rather specialised activity for certain kinds of people. You and I are both in the same boat really - from a working-class background, plucked out of it in all sorts of ways, aware of massive, profound changes in the society going around us, despising most of them. In that context, what we can inherit is of some importance to us but I'm not sure that there's that same relationship with the past with lots of other people".

He sees "modern culture as having been colonised", thinks that "we're a colonised people. Multinational capital with its local representatives has", he says, " colonised our consciousness. One aspect of that colonisation is a disconnection between the present and the past. We've turned the past into something we view in museums. One of the signs I hate most of all - I curse it every time I drive past it on the motorway - is 'Land of the

Prince Bishops'. I mean, 'Durham, Land of the Prince Bishops'? What about the 'Land of Coal Mines and Shipyards'? We've become disconnected from our real history".

He does, however, have some belief in Community Arts, albeit in a limited way. "There are always examples of quite vibrant local cultural activity, like the Consett Photo Archive in the 1970s, from time to time ... "Art", he sees "as any cultural product that enables you to see the world in a fresh way". He is "glad they're going to their Art groups and exploring their own abilities and their own experiences", though he views this as "an artistic process", the product isn't always 'Art' to him, "because it's not good enough". But it is "all part of that tapestry which constitutes the culture of this society and the more people get engaged with it, the more they understand themselves in fresh ways through it, the better". What he wants is for "people to live the contradictions and see a contradiction in the attitudes of people in the North East towards their past. They're living a myth and they've got to be helped to confront it, to feel the dissonance, because something of that past was absolutely awful. I wouldn't like anyone to have to live as my grandparents did".

Williamson feels that other societies, in Eastern Europe, for example, have a much deeper feel for their history and culture than in the North East:

"In Eastern Europe, you still have a very strong tradition of folk music and of folk songs and people know them and they know their folk-tales. They know their history and they know their

poets because that what's been vital to their sense of identity. What some Czech students picked up in the North East was that there wasn't any particular identity and, if there was, it wasn't in any way linked to anything that they thought of as culture; it wasn't connected with art, poetry, music, extending human experience; it was connected with football teams, beer, capitalism, whatever it is".

His worry is that such cultural activity as there is is "not embedded, it only gets embedded if it can be made in some way commercial and then that means it's going to be hijacked by the music industry and the mass media and so on". He would "like to think that what people in the North East identified with was people the world over who have a common cause against exploitation, against injustice, against poverty, against racism". To Williamson "the 'Geordie' bit is deeply worrying - especially with 'Geordie' as a male character, a 'Jack the Lad' figure, a boozer - he's pathetic really".

THE JINGLING GEORDIE

Watch me go leaping in my youth
down Dog Leap Stairs,
down fire-scapes.
The Jingling Geordie
born in a Brewery,
drinking the money
I dug out of the ground.

Cloth-cap in hand I go
marching in the jangling morning
to London gates.

Jingling Geordie
living in a hop-haze,
cadging from the Cappers
I went to the school with.

Older I get in my cage,
singling out a girl half my years
to hitch with.
Oh yes! I am the Jingling Geordie,
the one who pisses on himself,
wrenching out the telephone
his Father placed off the hook.

Listen to my canny old folk-songs;
they lilt and tilt into the dark alley,
into the howls of strays.
Oops! The Jingling Geordie
goes out on his town,
rocking and rolling a night away,
stacking it with the weary rest.

See my ghost in the discotheque,
in the dusty lights,
in the baccy rows.
Jingling Geordie,
dancing gambler,
betting he'll slip
back to the year when the lads won the Cup.

Well I walk my kids to the Better Life,
reckoning up the rude words dripping
like gravy off me Granda's chin.
Whee! goes the Jingling Geordie:
figment of the gutter brain,
fool of the stumbling system,
emptying my veins into a rich men's - palace.

Keith Armstrong

For academics like David Byrne "it seems abundantly clear that only proper, democratically based, regional control over economic development and industrial policy will allow the North East to have any chance of achieving the decent future its people so clearly want" (Geordies, Eds. Colls & Lancaster, Chapter 2, p35-52, 1992). Not that this will be easily achieved. Changes in the world economy are essential, as well as a move towards a truly federal Europe and a shift in the inequality between 'North' and 'South' worldwide. It is through such changes that the region's people can find a voice and be able to articulate the sort of society they want which is, in Byrne's view, "more egalitarian, open, [with] a high level of public services, and ... based on full employment in a successful and modern industrial structure. It looks very like Scandinavian social democracy, and the North East with its three million people would make a very reasonably sized Scandinavian nation-state".

Byrne's view is backed up by that of Robert Colls; "If the North East wants to save itself and secure a future, it will have to claim the right to its representation ... If the North East is to survive into another century, it must be free to make its own stories, stories that can be given back to temper shape and substance" (Geordies, Eds. Colls & Lancaster, Chapter 1, p1-34, 1992). The struggle will be a hard one. As I have tried to express above, the economic and political devastation of the last twenty years has weakened the region terribly. For example, the labour movement is unable to operate as strongly as it once

could. As Colls puts it: "Through this movement in all its rich associational life, from sports clubs to cooperative societies to trade unions, the working classes were better able to represent themselves in terms of labour power, skill, cultural enterprise, organisational achievement and a dense community presence. Today, the skills are less widespread, less controlled, less defended; the cultural enterprise has to cope with more powerful, private or state, formations; the political movements' institutional and ideological coherence hardly exists; and the communities, or many of them, have been razed to the ground, redeveloped, rehoused or, as in the 1984-5 miners' strike, beaten into submission" (ibid). Though the basis of self organisation which was established through the grass-roots labour movement in the region's traditional industries has gone, for David Byrne "the material base of class politics" has not been weakened. "On the contrary", he says, "increasing insecurity and the immiseration of much of the employed workforce through the payment of low wages to 'flexible' labour on the U.S. model, means that proletarianisation is extending, not diminishing". Despite what he describes as "the profound deindustrialisation of the North and the associated disorganisation of the northern working class", he believes that "at the cultural level the values of class survive rather well, as they deserve to ... [in] a region whose people believe in inclusive collectivism, and understand perfectly well that capitalism is essentially a system of exploitation". To this extent, he sees 'New Labour' politicians,

like the "half-educated" Tony Blair, as "scavengers living off the corpse ... acting as the lackies of globalisation ... an external thing ... imposed without reference to the values and needs of the people of the North". He has confidence in "the strength of the traditional value system" but is worried by "the pessimism that people feel about having any capacity for doing anything about the forces which seek to destroy the achievements of those values in the past, and to recast the future against them" (Northern Review, Vol. 6, 1998, p85-94).

In these changing times, it is, says Byrne "time for all good people to come to the aid of the region"! (ibid). In this context, the issue of class remains because, as Ken Worpole points out, "no amount of political modernisation, whether of the 'New Labour' or 'New Times' variety, can hide the fact that that aspects of class continue to fundamentally determine the quality of life-chances, as well as the structures of feeling of millions of people in Britain today" (Federation of Worker Writers Magazine, Vol. 8, 1996, p2). And, in order for people to participate in changing these changing times, for Worpole, "it usually starts with the voice", because "our very sense of our own self is intimately connected with the way we speak". He goes on: "Most strong regional accents and dialects remain grounds for exclusion. The accents of the public schools and of the Home Counties continue to dominate the upper reaches of power, influence and money ... It is not [therefore] surprising that so many people involved in the adult literacy movement, in English

teaching in primary and secondary schools, in oral history and in the writers' workshop movement, talk about the importance of encouraging people to find their own voice. Finding your own voice is still the most transparent metaphor for being taken seriously culturally" (ibid).

Chapter 6. LETTING THE FLOWERS BLOOM: CLASS AND COMMUNITY ARTS IN THE NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND

'Men mind your Interest if you've Common Sense,
And hearken to Reason and Friend Thomas Spence'.

The Tyneside-based Amber Associates have been making films on North East working-class life for some twenty-five years. Their work presents an interesting case study in the sense that it serves to illustrate the major issues and dilemmas faced by 'community artists' in relation to the regional culture of the North East of England. Murray Martin of Amber places their work in relation to the landscape of the North East:

"If you look at our work since we started making feature films in the mid-eighties, there's a sort of 'agricultural' lilt to them. If you look at 'Sea Coal', it's collecting coal out of the sea, but nevertheless it's hardly 'Tyneside working-class-industrial', the seascapes are there, it's man and nature, it's capitalism in the raw. Subsequently, we did a film in North Shields which was about fishing, and though people think about fishing as industrial, it's not really, it's, again, agricultural and its basically out there in this seascape and it's got all the visual grandness of that" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

Martin sees Amber as responding to the cultural legacy of the North East and the issues and upheavals it faces as a region, but it is also a question of pursuing those things which interest him and the other members of the Amber 'collective'.

"If you look at, say, 'Sea Coal', late on there's a trotting race, two horses that race down a road and have a trot, and, partly as a result of that involvement with horses, we got involved with trotting - racing which is very big in Durham, it's one of those hidden cultures. We race formally on tracks, there's about twenty meetings throughout Durham and we're quite involved in organising them now. Having done a seascape film, we thought it'd be nice to make a landscape film, so you could start combining those interests you have. On the one hand, you're interested in horses because it's gambling and that totally links with industrial culture but, at the same time, it's also got this thing about man and nature".

Martin sees the concept of the North East being 'heavy-industrial' as part of a 'great mythology'. "Mining", he says, "is actually not 'heavy-industrial', it's village culture, small-town, even if you're talking about Easington, Ashington, some of the major areas - it's an isolated little town, Easington, it's not a big, highly industrial town. He comes from that sort of background himself and feels an empathy with it since his grandfather was a pitman in a little colliery called Dilhorne, near Stoke.

"In a sense, those small villages (Easington, for example) did feed the Tyneside heavy industry - they created the shipbuilding industry to some extent because of the coal trade. So the huge amounts of coal from these small villages in Durham and Northumberland helped create these big ports like Newcastle, Blyth and Sunderland". This sense of place is rooted in Amber's

work and crucial to it is Martin's attraction to Newcastle stemming from his days there at University: "You felt an empathy because Newcastle was very working-class" and "the only serious and genuine regional capital". "Newcastle had that grandness based on this village industry but also extremely working-class because that labour, that sweat, basically came from working people and created this great wealth".

Martin admits that "We've used the North East in a way. What do you do? In a sense you're trying to survive without doing people any harm - that's the ideal sort of existence, I did Fine Art (at University), and 'Fine Art' was full of superiority complexes, that somehow if you were an artist you were better - but you didn't deal with subject matter, you dealt with shape and line and colour or you dealt with some clever idea like 'Pop Art'. It was gobbledegook I think and you were trained in gobbledegook".

This commitment to the region is crucial to Amber's work. "Mass Observation", asserts Martin, "was market research related. People like Humphrey Spender who documented in Bolton were there for two weeks. They didn't commit themselves to the region. Bill Brandt spent two weeks in the north and built his reputation out of it. Whatever else we've done, whatever inadequacies and whatever false claims, we've been here for twenty-five years as a group". Martin is keen to stress Amber's relationship with the communities they work in. Rather than operating as 'cultural parachutists', zooming in and out of a community, they work there for a long time, off and on. "That's why our relationships are good. For example, we did work in Easington before the Strike, we

had a photographer in long before the Strike, so we've had a long-term ongoing relationship. There is a danger that people do go in and they don't spend their lives living there. But what we tend to do is work on five-year projects. We're involved and, if you're also training the horses, it's not boring. You've got to engage in the cultures haven't you?" As an example of this 'engagement' Martin cites Amber's work in North Tyneside in some detail:

"First of all, we had worked in North Tyneside off and on for a long time. The Shields Ferry film was shot in 1967. I'd lived from 1977 to 1984 in North Shields and I'd worked closely with Tom Hadaway - we made 'The Filleting Machine' in '82, we'd worked with a theatre group in North Shields called 'The Ridges' which played in the pubs and clubs. So these aren't minimal commitments. At one point in the mid-80s, I said I think we should re-engage with the community, we should basically make a commitment to working with a particular community ... I went to Newcastle Breweries and I said, "Look, we want a pub", because we felt that was the way in which you could actually interface with the community, if you're going to be in a community, root yourself in it physically and that's where people come. What happened was that the Brewery said to us that there's this pub called 'The New Clarendon', have a look at it, it hasn't closed yet, and they sold it to us for £21,000 freehold, which is not a huge amount of money. At the same time, we established a writer, Kitty Fitzgerald, to work on the Ridges estate, because she'd worked there before with a women's writers' group so she did a

project with them, their stories. What we're doing is, on the one hand, building a community base with all those things that interest us, our own leisure culture, if you like; we've got a writer working in North Tyneside; but we're also developing a distribution network with the trade unions around workplaces and, in the current affairs work we do, which we'll call issue-based, we did a soap - eight or ten episodes".

Amber had discussions with the local Credit Union which was felt to be increasingly important to people in North Shields, and initially wanted to make a P.R. film about their work. Amber felt it would be much more interesting to produce a soap which could be shown at local workplaces, council offices and so on through a different distribution mechanism and which would raise appropriate issues about Credit Unions. A script was written, entitled 'Loan Shark', "about a bloke who goes chasing a woman - her husband's at work and she's in debt to this bloke - and, out of desperation, she goes to the Credit Union and they welcome her in. Then the Credit Union use that trigger to show people how we deal with the problem for you. So that's the way we work. We try to put something back in that's useful and usable. Leading from the 'soap', came a film, on a somewhat broader canvas, about fishing, which Amber wanted to make". Martin insists that they don't claim to be 'Community Arts'. He cites a very early experience when "we established a youth club in Byker and it was very successful, and put in a Youth Worker, and it collapsed within a year, because it took the power from the kids. It's got to be about empowerment of the people themselves".

"Because you can actually put people on the telly, you're important in a way. I think that what you've got to do is go beyond that and make them understand the process so they understand their input. The difference between us and a conventional company is that if Tyne Tees goes in and makes a film they don't give people access to it". People from Easington attended a showing of Amber's recent film 'The Scar'. Martin finds this process fraught with "difficult, embarrassing and dangerous moments because people are sometimes critical, the one thing you ask them to be is not just sycophantic". Amber, according to Martin, does not just record tradition: "Our subjects are contemporary when they're made whereas the folk-tradition records what was in the past, they're retrieving it".

Martin and Amber have built up an impressive track-record over the twenty-five years of their existence. No one can doubt that. They have also managed to remain autonomous in their activities through their unique ability to diversify funding and not be over-dependent on just one institution such as Northern Arts. Whilst Martin is uncomfortable with the term 'Community Arts' there seems little doubt that, through their links with the region's culture and with the day-to-day lives of local people, their work does constitute community arts activity. What they have always retained, however, is a commitment to exploring their own agendas and maintaining their own role as 'artists'. This can lead them into areas of criticism.

It could be said that as original outsiders to the region, Martin and most of his associates are pursuing a somewhat voyeuristic

approach to working-class culture which is in danger of romanticising the working-class and which, above all, does not, as a rule, engage in political struggle. Involvement with the Credit Union in North Shields, for example, is seen as somewhat incidental to the main focus of Amber's ambition, which is to pursue its own interests; links with the Credit Union simply add to Amber's 'street credibility' and develop useful contacts; it is not part of an overriding strategy to change society from the grass-roots upwards.

Martin talks of "empowerment" of the people themselves, and encourages their involvement as performers in Amber productions and as critics of the film-making process, but real power always remains with himself as Director and the Amber team, it is never devolved to local people and Amber's skills in general remain with Amber, there seems to be little attempt to establish local people as film-makers and thus thoroughly demystify the film-making process. 'Community Arts', in the sense that people like myself understand it in our work with East Durham Community Arts and other groups, has to do with local autonomy, with the establishment of independent grass-roots initiatives where people begin to control their own lives, with the Community Arts workers using their skills and experience as enablers in the process.

Whilst Martin demonstrates Amber's commitment to the particular communities in which they work, this could be seen as opportunistically jumping from one idea which excites them to another, despite the length of time they commit to their projects. Even though, through undoubted enthusiasm, Martin and

others end up organising local harness-racing programmes and darts tournaments, they remain as 'outsiders' and would-be members of the local indigenous population. Amber, and the people they work with, have an undoubted capacity to survive but one might wonder whether this can be an end in itself, with little attempt at the kind of political engagement which might question the power structures which hold people back and prevent them exercising any real autonomy in their day to day lives.

John Mapplebeck of Bewick Films, who has produced numerous programmes for regional television has this to say about Amber: "I have always had a fundamental disagreement about their style of programme-making. I find most of their work incredibly soft-centred really. Until the arrival of Channel Four they always said they didn't like to do television. I remain terribly excited by television. It does seem to me that it offers a way of appealing to a tremendous number of people. Amber have this vague democracy where they don't have any credits. I think that's fake. There's very little evidence on the screen, from what I've seen, that they're anywhere near any closer a relationship [with local communities] than any other programme-makers around" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

Yet, as Mapplebeck admits, "Who's going to decide whether their approach or what I've tried to do is right? The most important thing is to let the flowers bloom and, to that extent, I'm glad that Amber have continued to operate, against all the odds".

In the world of 'community theatre', Michael Mould and the Bruvvers Theatre Company in Newcastle upon Tyne have been active,

like Amber, for around twenty-five years, with a strong commitment to what might be defined as 'rough theatre'. Mould: "We're concerned with making plays that are relevant to the audience and also have a lot of fun and excitement in them. People have changed and the majority of theatre hasn't kept up with these changes. People's concentration spans are much shorter now. Television has conditioned our watching habits. If you look at children's television on a Saturday morning, it's all in small sound-bites, three minutes and then a song, three minutes and then an interview - it's all information and it's the way people receive information, gather information, that's changed, it's much faster. But somehow theatre has not taken that on, it's still concerned with doing the three hour play with long intervals" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997). What Mould is arguing for here is a commitment to accessibility, which doesn't necessarily mean 'dumbing-down'. Accessibility is, in part, a matter of finding appropriate structures capable of reaching 'ordinary' people but it is also, as Mould believes, a question of subject matter too.

"Most of the subject matter [in today's theatre] is irrelevant to what is actually going on in the world. Of course, there will be plays done about AIDS etc, but mainly the concerns are those of the middle-class. I've always tried to make plays relevant to the working-class, especially the work we do for schools, community centres and old-age pensioners. In the old-age pensioners' work, we're talking about popular people's heroes - Tommy Cooper, George Formby, Gracie Fields, those sort of icons, and football,

'the popular entertainment'. In 1997, I wrote a script for the Bruvvers, entitled 'Pigs' Meat' and based on the life and works of the Newcastle-born radical Thomas Spence (1750-1814). This attempted to connect his political ideas on land reform and other issues to the concerns of the present-day by mixing songs, poetry and burlesque in a way calculated to inform people, in an entertaining manner, about the ideas involved, linked to their own heritage:

FOLK SONG FOR THOMAS SPENCE (extract):

Down by the old Quayside,
I heard a young man cry,
Among the nets and ships he made his way.
As the keelboats buzzed along,
He sang a seagull's song;
He called out for the Rights of you and me.

Oh lads, that man was Thomas Spence,
He gave up all his life
Just to be free.
Up and down the cobbled Side,
Struggling on through the Broad Chare,
He shouted out his wares
For you and me.

Oh Lads, you should have seen him gan,
He was a man the likes you rarely see.
With a pamphlet in his hand,
And a poem at his command,
He haunts the Quayside still,
And his words sing.

'Pigs' Meat' draws on the folk traditions of the North East of England and rescues from history the life of a working-class man who is little discussed today. Indeed, Spence is claimed to have invented the phrase 'The Rights of Man' (before Tom Paine) and he sought 'The End of Oppression', something which Michael Mould and the Bruvvers are still fighting for: "Every play we perform has a struggle against oppression. That's my main concern. They're always non-sexist, non-racist, and have a concern with a struggle against oppression".

The devastation of the North East region's heavy industries since the war under Labour government in the sixties and, more severely, under the Tories in the seventies and eighties mean, according to Robert Colls, that a whole generation of North East writers and artists would dwell on. What had been lost? They mused on the traditional values of community and collectivism that could be said to be in danger of disappearing and they reflected on ways in which such values could be preserved and built upon for the future. There were others like the legendary T. Dan Smith, the subject of a film by Amber Associates, who swam

against this tide. "The sooner all the mines were closed the better it would be", asserted Smith and in his contribution to the collection 'Geordies', Colls quotes this piece from Graham Turner on the people of Witton Park:

"They were clinging to the past, to something that was dying to a tight, cosy, clammy little world where there was nothing new or adventurous, or bracing, nothing of the challenge which had made their grandfathers such resilient ... there's an awful lot of Celtic twilight around the place" (Geordies, Eds. Colls & Lancaster, Chapter 2, 1992, p1-34).

It is in this climate that practitioners such as Murray Martin and Amber Associates and, community theatre, Michael Mould, ply their trade. Yet in all the much-vaunted gloom there are sparkling crystals to be found. Whilst artists like Martin and Mould are certainly community-spirited, with a sincere devotion to North East working-class culture, they are very much performers in their own right and are not really enablers intent on helping local people find their own voices and artistic skills. For this we must look to an example like the 'Ashington Painters', a group of local miners who took up painting back in October 1934 and very much 'went their own way', against the general drift in 'the Arts'. As Colls says: "Miners were there to be painted, perhaps, but they were not supposed to do the painting" (ibid). And they had to face all of the condescension which the North East continues to suffer:

"As manual workers, the Ashington Miners' art could not be reflective; it had to be primitive, without thought. As painters

who stayed, in the region, in their homes, in their jobs, the art could not address the universal: it had to be provincial" (ibid). Established attitudes were set against the 'Ashington Painters' seeing them as only fit to express the familiar which was seen as limited. "Art was separate from Industry ... something which had to be brought in from the outside" (ibid). Artists were seen by critics like Roger Fry as "a species of free-floating aesthetes enjoying "a life freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence". This was not how the Ashington Painters saw their work. They stood their ground, stayed wage labourers, formed their artists' lodge, painted when they could, took what learning was acceptable, and refused what they saw as the Arts Council's invitation to be exemplary northerners, refused to be impressed by Henry Moore's lumpy figures, refused to represent the region as in its death throes and refused to be separated from their subjects" (ibid).

This is the true spirit of 'Community Arts' as I see it. The extraordinariness of 'the ordinary'; the universality of 'the local'; the finding of one's true voice in the context of a genuine tradition, history and cultural landscape which asserts the region in all its autonomy against 'the Centre', and asserts the rights of the marginalised against the power of a self-appointed Executive. These are the voices of the disrespectful, the dissidents, the rebels in all their provincial glory grating against the bastions of high culture, the cold grip of town hall art.

Chapter 7. 'KEEP YOUR FEET STILL ANGEL HINNY': COMMUNITY ARTS EXPERIENCES IN THE NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND

MONUMENTS

They will build no more of
these winged tributes;
the feathered stones
of the Empire in flight
with God on our Tyne side.

There will be
no more heroes like
Cowen and Armstrong
and Stephenson and Grey.
Their self-made sculptures
have come
to a stand-still,
Baked in soot and
starling shit,
they shelter from
a life on the Dole.

Keith Armstrong

In a recent study of 'The social impact of participation in the Arts' (Use or Ornament, Comedia, 1997), Francois Matarasso opines that "the small place accorded to culture in social policy is probably due more to British scepticism of the arts and intellectualism than to anything else: it is just not to be taken seriously". Where it is taken seriously, it is by promoting the economic case and harnessing concepts of investment, tourism, 'cultural industries' and job creation. 'The arts' become valid because they make money and local authorities, in particular, have been very receptive to these concepts in their efforts to restructure the local economy. Labour spokesman Mark Fisher has echoed this sentiment in asserting that "The Labour government will be sympathetic because we know the cultural economy is not only good for the cities but it affects investment. Culture creates jobs" (Labour Party Cultural Strategy Document, 1997).

In the late 1980s, with monetarism at its height, the Policy Studies Institute published 'The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain' presenting arguments which stressed the significance of the arts in terms of investment, tourism, cultural 'industries' and job creation. "The arts were good because they made money" (Matarasso, Use or Ornament, 1997). Local authorities in the North East, struggling to restructure their economies, have become more receptive to such arguments.

Obviously, to perceive the arts only in economic terms is extremely narrowing. Lucy Phillips reflects this in a recent working paper: "If it were found tomorrow that laying brick walls had exactly the same success [as the arts] ... then laying brick

walls would win hands down: it would be easier to implement brick-laying programmes than arts programmes and undoubtedly cheaper. The missing element is an articulation of what is different about the arts" (In the Public Interest, Working Paper, Comedia, 1997).

Ian Watson makes a similar point: "If the only things that politicians can say in favour of the arts are that they employ people, attract investment, yield taxes and regenerate urban landscapes, then we may as well accept that these things are usually better done by other means - the arms industry, for instance - and stop arguing for better state support for the arts" (Arts Management Weekly, 28/2/97).

What Matarasso argues for is "a more balanced understanding of the role and worth of the arts in our society - one which simultaneously embraces their aesthetic, cultural, economic and social values ... We need to understand that the arts produce impacts as complex as the human beings who create and enjoy them" (Use or Ornament, Comedia, 1997).

There are a variety of ways in which 'community arts' can contribute to a local image and identity and transcend the merely economic. Participation in the arts can "develop pride in local traditions and cultures; help people feel a sense of belonging and involvement; create community traditions in new towns or neighbourhoods; involve residents in environmental improvements; provide reasons for people to develop community activities; improve perceptions of marginalised groups; help transform the

image of public bodies; make people feel better about where they live" (ibid).

"Suicide for Durkheim was all about a sense of place, of identity ... It wasn't personal circumstance that set people on the path to self-destruction, it was the stress of adaptation and change ... Being stable and integrated was the great inoculation against despair. To lose your fixed point of reference, at whatever levels, was to be in danger of losing your mind" (Tim Lott, The Scent of Dried Roses, Viking, 1996).

As Bill Lancaster comments, the North East has "had two decades of the worst government since King John where the regions, to be honest, had a big kicking and it had to survive, and the way it survived was by drawing on its cultural capital. This sense of belonging, this sense of identity, becomes very important to people. This is counter to the whole Marxist notion that culture is somehow part of the superstructure and that when you lose the economic base the cultural base collapses. That's been proved a total nonsense up here because we've lost the economic base upon which that culture was formed, i.e. mining, heavy engineering and shipbuilding, yet anybody with an ounce of perception can walk around this region and pick up very quickly the way that regional and cultural identity has actually grown over the last two decades, it's become more important to people. It's become a kind of emotional prop, a life-belt which has helped people survive" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

In a contribution to the recent 'Building Tomorrow's Communities' Conference held in North Shields, Hugues de Varine evaluated

regeneration projects across France. His view was that "any development policy should have a cultural dimension" (Conference Report, Banks of the Wear Housing Cooperative, 1997, p5). He looked at the centralised planning system in France and its shortcomings in addressing the problem of the five hundred or so neighbourhoods which experience severe deprivation across the country. "Many of these problems centred around issues of local autonomy, the balance between providing public subsidy and maintaining community empowerment ... and respecting the distinctions between the subsidised arts and community, youth and folk cultures" (ibid). He said that "French projects had run into difficulty when they ignored local cultural heritage and concentrated solely on promoting the professional arts". He referred, in particular, to the Ministry of Culture's promotion and financing of art programmes in marginalised neighbourhoods and accused it of operating "within the limits of its own logics which includes the total professionalisation of the arts". His evaluation of the cultural programmes in the urban areas of Northern France showed the gap which exists between intention and results. He particularly pointed out that the industrial and mining cultural heritage and the local populations was not considered by "the intervening artists".

De Varine insists that "any development policy should have a cultural dimension and make the community and its members partners and actors of any programme and evolution process". He points to positive results when there has been a recognition of the 'living culture' of the local urban communities.

Conference delegates to the 'Building Tomorrow's Communities' Conference visited a number of "high profile projects" on Tyneside with the aim of examining "how arts projects were contributing to regeneration in terms of community development, enhanced economic activity, image and well-being" (Conference Report, p7). Visitors to the Royal Quays development in North Shields "heard how incorporating some participatory art had become integral to the whole initiative. There, poems on the theme of change and continuity, written by a group of women residents during work with a local poet, are built into the walkways in a park; a major sculpture is also planned for a large roundabout at the centre of the Quays" (ibid).

David Byrne has a somewhat jaundiced view of the Royal Quays and is angry at the way that "the people who are trying to promote a post-industrial strategy have tended to pick up in a most parasitic way aspects of the popular culture and are trying to just load it as a kind of veneer onto the things that they're doing. A good example would be the Royal Quays development which is all laid around with things connected with the maritime industrial heritage, despite the fact that the Royal Quays was put into a place which effectively fucked up that area and took a very important deep-water site which could have been used for industry - it could have been a shipyard possibly but certainly offshore which is still relatively strong. Slavered all over it is the iconic symbolism of the river and you see the same sort of thing around the Market Dock in South Shields" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

How far do artists comply with the ethos of such quango-inspired developments by accepting their commissions?

Our Conference delegates, mostly comprised of professionals in the Arts and Community Work fields, moved on to the Customs House Arts Centre in South Shields where they "heard about activities in the Centre, and about associated programmes of community arts. They also listened to a presentation on South Tyneside M.B.C.'s regeneration strategy. Delegates on the trip to the Baltic Flour Mill (where a new art gallery complex is to completed by September 2001) also took in a presentation at Bede Community Centre on Old Fold estate. The Centre is the base for a literacy group, and has an arts group that has won National Lottery funding. The arts group grew out of a 'Development Day' during which local people came into the Centre to discuss plans for the future. The group is currently involved with a painting and sculpture project to make the Centre their own. The Centre is a focus for liaison with other officers, including health workers, who also use art techniques to explore health issues" (Conference Report). The delegates were then addressed by Mike White, Gateshead Arts Officer, who "outlined the arts programme, which was building up to the Baltic Mills re-development and would include artists in residence and a drama project, integrating old and young people to look at fear of crime" (ibid).

David Byrne, a Gateshead Councillor as well as an academic, has been able to build up an informed opinion of these local developments and, in particular, the high profile sculpture based in his town, 'The Angel of the North': "Nobody is against the

Baltic Flour Mill project in Gateshead, it's a popular project, the local people want the building (though there's an issue about the content). But, of course, the price for the Baltic project was the fucking Angel. It's perfectly unequivocal, it was said in the Labour Group in Gateshead that we have been told that we've got to have the Angel if we're going to get support for the Baltic Flour Mill; the Angel was an absolute imposition, not that I'm opposed to public art in Gateshead - some of it is appalling but some of the more abstract stuff is actually very interesting and popular. But what was interesting was that for this great public sculpture there was no real local commission or conception of what it should be or specification. You were told you're going to have a big artist who's going to make a big thing, and you can pick from four - and the Holy Catholics picked the bloody Angel, that's what happened, because they thought, 'Oh, it's religious'. That was the price that was paid for the Baltic Flour Mill and I think that sums up the cultural politics, to tell you the truth. The Flour Mill itself is not an objectionable thing but the Angel is" (ibid).

'The Angel of the North', 65 feet wide and 175 feet high, is the work of Turner Prize-winning sculptor Anthony Gormley, a former public schoolboy and Cambridge University student. It is based on a cast of his own body. The Angel is intended to be a 'gateway sculpture', sited on a landscaped mound and sunk deep into the old seams of a coal mine to mark 'the gateway to Tyneside' as envisaged originally by Peter Davies, the then Head of Visual Arts at Northern Arts. In 1988 Gormley had designed a 120 foot

high Brick Man for Leeds but after public opposition the council backed out - they "clearly have a more timid idea of the city's future than me", remarked Gormley. But Gateshead councillors, having seen examples of his work, wanted an angel.

The Council at least "honoured its pledge to sink none of Gateshead's money into the sculpture. The £800,000 cost of commissioning and making the work came from the Lottery (£584,000), the European Regional Development Fund (£150,000) and Northern Arts (£45,000), with business sponsorship making up the balance" (David Whetstone, The Journal, 16/2/98).

As William Feaver has commented, "Gateshead now boasts the world's biggest angel ... [it] has long lacked an image ... With the Angel, Gateshead is badged" (The Observer, 22/2/98).

In terms of concepts of 'Community Arts', the 'Angel' raises a complex range of significant issues. It is another example of the haste of quangos, national and regional institutions, with the complicity of the majority of Labour councillors, to install what David Byrne described earlier as "a post-industrial strategy". Much has been made of the "massive feat of planning, engineering and co-operation" (Steven Lamb, The Journal, 16/2/98), which the Angel represents, and the fact that it was built by Hartlepool Steel Fabrication. A triumphant use of the North East's traditional skills blended with the high-tech, we are told. It literally rises on the broken backs of miners and the old industries devastated in recent years. Andrew Dixon, Chief Executive of Northern Arts, welcomed it as demonstrating that the North East is not just about history. What it certainly doesn't

represent is any kind of continuity between past and present and any meaningful association with the culture of those communities who live in its ample shadow. With a minimal amount of effective consultation, it has been implemented through the Arts Council, Northern Arts and a local authority desperate for ideas for the future and lacking confidence in its area's own history and culture, a desperation shared by the regional media which feeds off the public relations and promotional hype which has surrounded the venture. It is a triumph for the professionalisation of the Arts and the rash of 'Angelic poems' by local schoolchildren displayed on the Tyneside Metro only heightens 'the triumph'. Any vision of Community Arts must begin with the local, with power in the hands of local people, with them having an effective say in what is going on around them, indeed demanding a say. In that sense, the 'Angel of the North' does not reflect the local culture and its inherent humanity; if it did, it might, as one bystander at its unveiling commented, best "covered in black and white stripes"! It might have been a monument to local miners' leader Tommy Hepburn, giving its location above an old pit, or a tribute to the pioneering wood-engraver Thomas Bewick, who lived and died in Gateshead and is famed internationally for his illustrations of birds and animals. As Joan Hugman comments: "Tyneside has some very fine public sculptures: the War Memorial at the Haymarket (in Newcastle) and the other War Memorial in the grounds of the Civic Centre; St George and the Dragon in Old Eldon Square. People are very fond of them. There are also the statues of people like George

Stephenson and Joseph Cowen with a certain amount of personality attached to them. The Cowen statue was a subscription statue; in other words, public money was gathered and it was commissioned on the back of that large body of public support for it.

The Jackie Milburn statue on Northumberland Street was a subscription one, run through the pages of the Evening Chronicle. At the end of the day, it was something that the people wanted but whether the actual design is something they would have chosen is another matter. I think the sculpture should have borne in mind the constituency the sculpture was meant to serve; in other words, those people who paid for it I think had something else in mind. I think that if you'd asked the people what they wanted in Newcastle, if you'd submitted draft designs through the Chronicle and asked people to vote for the one they thought was most appropriate, I don't think they would have chosen the 'mud-clad figure' they got!" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997)

Indeed, at the unveiling of the Jackie Milburn statue, one ex-Newcastle United footballer was heard to mutter, "Wor Jackie never had an arse like that!"

ANGELS PLAYING FOOTBALL

(in memory of Jackie Milburn)

Sprinkle my ashes on St James' Park,
fragments of goals on the grass.
Hear the Gallowgate roar in the dark.
All of my dreams came to pass.

Pass me my memories,
pass me the days,
pass me a ball and I'll play:

play with the angels,
play on their wings,
play in the thunder and lightning.

I leave you these goals in my will,
snapshots of me on the run.
I leave you these pieces of skill,
moments of me in the sun.

Pass me my memories,
pass me the days,
pass me a ball and I'll play:

play with the angels,
play on their wings,
play in the thunder and lightning.

Keith Armstrong

I agree with Christopher Harvie in saying that "People have got to have some notion of a possible state in which they can exercise some sort of control over their own lives. I think this is possible with a lot of hard work, with a degree of toughness

and resilience among folk. Areas like folk songs, local working class writers, local historians, are very important in this but it's also got to be tied in with considerable decentralisation of political power where people feel that their local government, right down to community council level, gives them real power at their disposal - things are not going to be sent down from London. It would at least be something, for instance, if all the income from - something I totally disapprove of! - the National Lottery were to be distributed democratically in the North East" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1996).

Ros Rigby, Administrator of Newcastle-based 'Folkworks', sees a very positive role for Community Arts: "I think that any area of the Arts that is strongly about self-expression and giving people the tools and the confidence to take that forward is political in its way and we're strongly into that. The difference between us and some other Arts organisations is that anyone we work with as a performer has to show a commitment to passing on what they know to other people and to respecting those other people at whatever level of ability they are - so, even if they're dire, still treating them like a human being. But, actually, if you think about it, there are some other parts of the Arts where the majority of the population would be considered unfit to approach the art-form, they just would not be good enough, whereas in folk music what we're really basing it on is this is the kind of music anybody can have a go at. They might not be very good at it but they can have a go and we will help them do that" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1996).

She goes on to talk about the strength of regional culture in the North East and the efforts of Folkworks to build on this: "It's the old thing about the English - the Scots, the Irish, no problem, but, once you get to England, what do you have without veering into the unpleasant side of nationalism or 'Land of Hope and Glory'? I don't think there is one culture but there are regional cultures that are strong and here it is very strong. Most schools here could do the chorus of 'The Blaydon Races' but if you go into Rowlands Gill Junior School and ask 'Do you know 'Wor nanny's a Maiser'?', I'm sure they wouldn't, but it's a great song and they should know it. That's the very straight-forward end of what we do. It's about the music of this region and just making sure that the kids in the region know that it's there if they want to use it" (ibid).

Whilst this is obviously significant work, Ros Rigby is also aware of the contradictions: "The price you pay is that you become more 'establishment' and not everyone will like that and those who think that a very important part of folk music is the more radical edge to it will think that we're not engaging with that and they might be right. We're doing a big project on songwriting at the moment called 'Songmakers' with workshops going on all around the region and it'll be interesting to see what comes out of those workshops in terms of the songs that are performed and whether that will lead to any problems with Sainsbury's" (one of the chief funders).

For Bill Lancaster, as opposed to 'Folkworks', "folk culture tends to come about spontaneously". He stresses that "there's an

incredible folk culture in Northumberland" and he is, he says, "acutely aware of it, its richness, its diversity, which is actually astounding". As an example of spontaneity he cites a pub up the Northumbrian coast: "Every January on Burns Night there's shepherds come down from the hills to this pub. They've been going there for 30-40 years and they give recitations. What comes out very strongly is that they see Robbie Burns as their poet (Burns isn't Scottish - he's that phrase we've lost track of: 'North British'). Now this is a tradition that's still there, it's still vibrant, it's given this wonderful expression every year. OK, there's a pub which gives them a venue, people turn up and we sit there and get drunk until 3 o'clock in the morning, that's all they ask in terms of payment" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

Chapter 8. 'WHERE EXPLOSIONS ARE NO MORE': COMMUNITY ARTS IN DURHAM

"God protect the lonely widow and raise up each drooping head;
Be a father to the orphans, do not let them cry for bread.
Death will pay us all a visit, they have only gone before,
And we'll meet the Trimdon victims where explosions are no more".

(Tommy Armstrong)

As a Community Arts Development Worker in East Durham, it was not easy to 'fit in'. Being someone who was born in Newcastle upon Tyne, albeit to working-class stock (my father was a shipyard worker at Swan Hunters for over thirty years), and who attended grammar school there before qualifying as a librarian, I was used to a somewhat more 'cosmopolitan' environment. I had never visited Peterlee New Town until I was invited to interview there. To locals, therefore I could be defined as an outsider, a member of 'Them'. 'Them', as Hoggart describes it in his 'The Uses of Literacy', includes the policemen and those civil servants or local authority employees whom the working-classes meet - teachers, the school attendance man, "the Corporation, the local bench ... To the very poor, especially, they compose a shadowy but numerous and powerful group affecting their lives at almost every point; the world is divided into 'Them' and 'Us'" (Them and Us, Uses of Literacy, 1965, p72-5). 'The Arts' were no exception.

I would carry books in a plastic carrier-bag when visiting the local pub in order not to be set apart as a 'teacher' or 'student', someone better educated than 'us', showing off 'their' superiority, their useless knowledge. 'We' were the practical ones, the 'grafters' who used their hands, had their feet on the ground, proud that 'we' lacked the airs and graces, the inhibitions even, of the 'superiors'. The Community Arts project had been established through the initiative of the Community Development team of Peterlee Development Corporation, together with the local Community Association and Northern Arts. The 'quango'-led project seemed an artificial construct from the outset echoing the Corporation's slogan: 'Peterlee is the place to be' (to which locals had added: 'if you want to be a divorcee'!). It smacked of short-term interventionism and opportunism, a 'Community' Arts project foisted on the locality with very little real consultation and, therefore, without much credibility in the eyes of 'Us'.

Obviously, there are complex and contrasting forces at work here. "Certainly working-class people have a strong sense of being members of a group, and just as certainly that sense involves the assumption that it is important to be friendly, cooperative, neighbourly. 'We are all in the same boat'; 'it is no use fighting one another'; 'in unity is strength' ... but it is a tolerance which works freely only if the chief class assumptions are shared ... We know that the pressure to conform expresses itself in an intricate network not of ideas but of prejudices which seek to impose a rigid propriety ... the puritanism ...

lives to some degree among those in whom can be found the wider forms of tolerance" (ibid). Huw Beynon, in 'Masters and Servants', points to two different traditions existing side by side in Durham. "Popular tradition ... asserted that a man had the right to determine his own life, to make his own choices ... regularly expressed through the words of Burns: 'a man is a man for all that'. In this view the certitudes spoken of by Lee, Lawson and Wilson, [miners' leaders - K.A.] were simply a part of a cloistered, official world (in Durham or Westminster); a world detached from 'real life'. This popular tradition was at home in the pubs and clubs and it contrasted strongly with Lee's sacred duty and the idea of service drawn from the chapel ... The official and 'sacred' version asserted the dignity of man and his labour; the popular and profane version emphasised the right to liberty" (Beynon & Austrin, Master & Servants, Rivers Oram Press, 1994, p283-4).

My own roots led me to feel a class solidarity with the majority of people living in East Durham. My approach to Community Arts was concerned with giving more local people a voice; a chance to express themselves in their own words, and to gain confidence through this by having their experiences and feelings valued, published and broadcast. It also involved developing networks and establishing autonomous local groups which could play a part in empowering working-class people in however small a way. The aim was to overcome potential parochialism by linking with people in other localities, in the North East and beyond. In all this there was an implied assumption that most people were politically

alienated - from local and national government, and that Community Arts could enable them to express this alienation and to help them in taking action against it.

Such a perspective meant drawing upon the positive elements of community referred to above as well as fighting to take things further by exposing social and racial prejudice and raising political awareness. It saw the Community Arts Development Worker as an educator and cultural activist, an an enabler and political coordinator, aligned to the issues and everyday concerns facing local people. It was a subversive role seeking to radicalise a network of members of the local community to claim a voice for themselves, to stir up local politicians and their insular power-making structures in order to challenge the prevailing social and political orthodoxies. However, the Community Arts Worker was just as much in a learning process as the people he worked with and needed to develop an intimate understanding of the locality in order to achieve local respect and credibility.

With this in mind, I decided to live in Peterlee so that I could not only forge a closer working relationship with the various groups and individuals but also share the same living conditions and social life, as far as possible at any rate given my background, previous interests and perspectives. In making this commitment I was at least taking up an option which local Development Corporation staff, teachers, social workers, etc, did not as a rule adopt. And it was no easy decision given local living conditions! Mark Hudson, in his study of the mining village of Horden, 'Coming Back Brockens', graphically highlights

this: "... the very conception of Peterlee had in the mind of many of its inhabitants acquired a sense of bathos, even a faint disgrace. The much vaunted Science and Technology Park, that would not only bring much needed employment to the area, but 'add immeasurably to the influence of Britain in Europe', and the long promised arts centre, a brick of neither of which was ever laid; ... the decision to get an artist to erect flat-roofed houses under the onslaught of the North Sea wind and rain; all these things somehow cohered in the minds of many of the inhabitants to taint the idea of Peterlee. Among middle-class people living in places like Durham City or Newcastle, the fact that one was living in or near Peterlee elicited a groan of sympathy ... For such people the very name of Peterlee had a derisory ring ... There was no theatre, no bookshop in Peterlee, or in the whole of East Durham ... But the most depressing thing about the place was the abjectness with which the populace appeared to accept this mediocrity, and third rateness" (Coming Back Brockens, 1994).

It was part of East Durham Community Arts project's aims to challenge this 'mediocrity', to encourage creativity and local imagination, to subvert the cliqueishness and macho-parochialism of local Labour Party politics, to form autonomous groups which would help people take some control of their lives, develop greater self-confidence and more personal satisfaction. This required not only working closely with progressive elements of the community but also meant bringing in skills and experience from outside practitioners. In saying this, there is no denying that there was a strong element of apathy pervading the area, a

sense of isolation from more cosmopolitan influences, as Hudson highlights. But there was a positive cultural inheritance derived from the communal traditions of local mining communities, a neighbourliness and supportiveness which remained a force for good despite the harsh and sometimes brutal downside to this equation. One wouldn't want to exaggerate the impact of a Community Arts project with two workers and a budget of £20,000 per annum on a complex area such as East Durham, but by aligning ourselves with, for example, the Save Easington Area Mines Campaign (S.E.A.M.), the local Housing Campaign, or the Thorpe Hospital Campaign there was a social and political role to play which help debunk the 'Arts for Arts Sake' approach of so many other Northern Arts funded projects. By working in this way, we had a better chance of being accepted in the area and, therefore, opening up a dialogue which would enable us to introduce radical ideas and projects and build up a commitment to our work through our local Management Committee and other groups.

Hudson's book was published in 1994, ten years after the Miners' Strike and the social upheaval which devastated East Durham. My period as a Community Arts Development Worker was from 1980 to 1986, a crucial time when there had been perhaps more hope amongst the community, even though there was still a downtrodden atmosphere in a town like Peterlee, understandably given the way in which people had been manipulated and let down constantly by the powers that be. Now that the battle has been lost and the pits have gone it is hard to feel optimistic about the future of young people in the area. But it is too easy for an outsider such

as Hudson to insinuate that people do nothing to change the 'third rateness' which dominates their lives. I can illustrate this by pointing to the work programme initiated by myself and others at East Durham Community Arts.

One of the many groups which developed was East Durham Writers' Workshop, which began in July 1980 and was active in organising visits to the area by writers such as black performance poets Benjamin Zephaniah and Linton Kwesi Johnson, Roy Clarke (the author of TV's 'Last of the Summer Wine'), Glaswegian poet and scriptwriter Liz Lochhead and performance poet Adrian Mitchell. Their visits included sessions in local schools. In addition, members of the Workshop gave frequent readings in local community centres, old people's homes, schools, etc, including performances at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and in Peterlee's twin town of Nordenham, Germany. There was also a regular publishing programme featuring members' work in the group's magazine 'Fall Out', in poetry-posters, and in a booklet, 'Kicking Around', which included poems by Workshop members and local schoolchildren, the product of workshop sessions by members in Dene House Comprehensive School. Regular open meetings were also held to enable local people to come along and read and discuss their writing. A spin-off from the Workshop was 'Women's Words', a group of Peterlee women who met to write and talk about their lives with the support of the Community Arts project and the Workers' Educational Association. One woman wrote:

"'Women's Words' is my weekly lesson in communication - not only with those around me, but with my inner self: the knotted,

twisted one that I locked away years ago. Lately she's seen the light of day through the bars at the window. I am seeing a different side of me now, one I like very much. I'd love to stay like this for some time to come. It's nice" (East Durham Community Arts Newsletter, 1983).

It was this kind of activity which led to the development of 'Durham Voices' a series of community publications which enabled working-class people throughout County Durham to express themselves in their own words, either written or recorded on tape. The first of these publications was 'The Last Coals of Spring' in which women from Easington Colliery published their poems and songs written at the Miners Cafe during the Strike of 1984. Other booklets included a past and present view of the communities of Thornley, the Trimdons, Fishburn and Teesdale, produced in association with the East Durham 2000 project (established by Durham Rural Community Council) and the respective local authorities. These projects were established with local autonomous groups who, in the cases of Thornley, the Trimdons and Fishburn, went on to publish themselves. Each publication was launched at specially organised events featuring readings from the publication and local performers. In the case of the Trimdons, a touring show based on the life of an aged miner in Trimdon Village supplemented the publication and featured local folk musicians. A festival of folk music and an exhibition of historical photographs added to the impact of the project.

Another example of local people taking initiative with the help of East Durham Community Arts was the Peterlee Musicians' Collective, which brought together young musicians to stage live music events featuring local bands (such as 'Crucified by Christians', 'Uproar' and 'State of Emergency') together with guest bands from outside the area (including 'The Toy Dolls', 'Newtown Neurotics' and 'Attila the Stockbroker'). The Collective built up a pool of sound amplification equipment to be used at these events and by musicians for rehearsal purposes. The equipment was loaned out for a nominal charge to musicians, as well as local schools and community groups arranging performances. The Collective had an informal structure with fortnightly meetings attended by a group of musicians and non-musicians alike whose ages ranged from fourteen to twenty-five.

An Art Club was also developed by the Community Arts project which staged exhibitions at venues as diverse as the Norseman Hotel, outdoors in Peterlee town centre, and in the local supermarket. Visits were also organised on a regular basis with trips to galleries and museums and sketching excursions.

All of the projects outlined above were undertaken in a period of enormous social upheaval and concerned with a concept of coming to terms with ourselves by a link between past, present and future. As Hewison states, "If 'we' are to come to terms with the inevitable disruptions of change, then we must seek to understand it, and not reject it as only more evidence of decline. The continuity between past and present must be maintained ... There is no denying that the erasures of modernisation and recession

have been an enormous disruption, but if we are to make any sense of them, they must be confronted, however painfully. It is no solution to retreat into a fake history, we need to recover the true continuity between past and present ... The answer is to develop a critical culture which engages in a dialogue between past and present" (Hewison, The Heritage Industry, 1987, p143).

Chapter 9. 'STRONG WORDS: 'NORTHERN VOICES'

> "When you're a pitman's poet and looked up to for it, wey, if a disaster or a strike gans wi'oot a song from you, they say 'What's wrang wi' Tommy Armstrong, has someone druv a spigot into him an let oot aal the inspiration?!'" (Tommy Armstrong)

> "Making rhymes and songs used to run through the pits like a fever. Some of them used to gan daft thinking of verses. Even us young lads used to answer back in rhyme" (Joseph Skipsey).

A commitment to the encouragement of local voices set in a communal landscape need not be a narrow thing. For Community Arts to me is both local and universal. I raised this issue with Eberhard Bort of the University of Edinburgh in a recent interview in which we discussed the notion of regionalism in a European framework. For Eberhard, or 'Paddy' as he is known to his friends, "there is a problem in Europe and its superstructures becoming so large that it's decision-making processes are too far away from the people. There needs to be a counter-movement and I think that federalism provides that to a certain degree. It's not a panacea but the fundament is that Europe is being built from the grass-roots, from below, and that means that people in their own region - where they are at home,

where they connect with their identity, have a say there in how things are being divided" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1996). This ability to 'have a say' is grounded not only in the development of appropriate political structures but also in developing confidence in people by encouraging them to find their own voice on a personal and cultural level. As Adrian Mitchell puts it, there is no point in "freedom of speech if you've got nothing to say". For the English this presents particular difficulties, pin-pointed by Eberhard Bort who has a deep understanding of the German cultural situation and the ways in which regionalism works there and hence in Europe generally:

"Within a federal state like Baden-Wurtemberg you have different cultural regions and dialect regions. The miracle is that an identity has been forged that is a Baden-Wurtemberg identity. There's hardly any cultural or national separatism. There's a high satisfaction rate within German federal states. The identity that has been created for these states is actually a glue that sticks ... Below or superceding that state identity you also have cultural identities which are narrower than that state's and at the same time a German identity, following the German football team or God knows what, and, amongst that, a European identity. If you have a local base and you're happy with your local identity and you have a feeling that you have a say in what's going on there, it's not at all a problem to have other identities, not competing with it but complementing it" (ibid).

But, as Bort goes on to articulate, this cannot easily be said of the English situation:

"Coming to the British example, the problem here is that particularly the English, with that English/British problem, don't have that home base and that makes it very difficult for them to experience a European dimension to their identity or to get straight a local, regional, national one. If you look at it, the Scots, the Welsh, the Irish have far less problems with being European. If you have a certain pluralism of identity within your own home ground, I think it's easier to align yourself to a greater identity as well" (ibid).

In establishing projects such as 'Strong Words' and 'Northern Voices' in the North East of England, our intention was to put into print the experiences, ideas and passions of local people normally denied the opportunity of publication in order to help them grow as human beings by developing their communication skills, as well as engendering a dialogue within local communities which would help foster a wider understanding of the social, political and economic forces which conditioned people and the communities in which they resided. Some of the writing we published was in dialect but none the weaker for that; this by Jack Common (from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne's Jack Common Archive):

DIALECT POEM

Ye've worried yerself till ye can't
Keep yer hands from yer mooth.
Yer eyes have grown dark
Wi lang lookin' out,
Ye'll fidget and fret, little fool
Till ye're pale as a clout -
Can't ye trust me a bit?

He should ha' cum sooner, he'll not
Come now like what he said;
He's got a new fancy,
Some babe he deceives.
A'll never forgive him his lies
As long as A live -
Ah, wait a minute.

A'm comin' as soon as A've made
Five pund an' got me fare
An' a bit mair te take
Ye aboot an' de a show
Ye niver would like me te cum
Home broke, well ye know
Ye'd look down at that.

Mebbe a week or two mair,
An' then, my fedgetty lass,
A'll cum an' tumble ye
Tight in me arms,
An' hold ye there hard
Till ye can't get yer breath
An' yer eyes look up dancin'
An' yer swear it's yer death
Te have such a lad.

Or, this from Fred Reed (Keith Armstrong, Ed., Cumen and Gannin, Selected Poems, 1977):

CUMEN AND GANNIN

One corpse filled wi' will
Cums totterin' doon the lane
Wi' such a detormined mein
It frightens yer!

A skeleton stored wi' pain -
Arthritis gnaas hor byens.
And theor's the wind 'nd rains,
Bad laddie in hoyin' styens,
And puddles she must plodge
Wi' lang-worn slipshod shoon,

Rumbustious bairns t'dodge
And numbness in hor croon
Aroond one star of thowt.
It seems the screamin' pain
T'hor means nowt.

The day seems short of air,
Theor's agony in hor chist
And aall doon one thin airm.
Hor specs are aall amist.

And wheor hor calves should be
The blud's not gettin' through
T'ease the achin' cramp
'Neath veins of darker blue,
Aall bulged and hard.
But for the twein' wind
She cud put up hor gamp.
Hor consciousness is blind
But still one thowt's a lamp.
Theor'll be dire consequences -

The woman knaas that fine -
As threeds of icy wether
Gan tricklin' doon hor spine.

Yit in hor hairt's a song
Not hushed wi' misory
As granny moves along
Se inexorably
T'heor hor new grandbairn
Cry oot its lood protest
That wi' the gift of mortal life
The poor thing's just been blissed.

Expressed in this way, dialect can be beautifully expressive but, as Bort says, it can also "be a regressive thing if you have nothing else. If you are able to express yourself in your own native dialect but at the same time are able to converse in an understandable English with everybody else there's no problem, it's enriching, it's not regressive, it's not insular in that sense. Speaking of High German or Oxford English, there's hardly anything more sterile than these 'Standards'. What I'm arguing for is all sorts of steps in between ... Being part of a variety of slightly different cultures and mingling with them helps. I talked about different layers of identity complementing each other, it's the same with cultural languages. If you're brought up in a culture where you've had access to two different dialects, for instance, or to two different languages to make it even more clear, you find it much easier adopting a fourth and fifth and sixth language perhaps than if you've grown up in a monolithic culture, in a monoglot culture with one language, one culture. You haven't seen anything else and it's very difficult

then to branch out and have an understanding of the otherness or the difference" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1996).

In a review of Chris Searle's 'None But Our Words: Critical Literacy in Classroom and Community' (Open University Press, 1998), Tony Harcup talks of Searle's concern "to build links between words on the page and the world outside 'the classroom'" (Harcup, New Statesman, 26/6/98). Searle, in describing the value of literacy to a young girl in expressing her emotions says that "Words are helping here, they are her friends, for in her frustration and loneliness she has relied upon them and they are coming back with clues and some answers". It is this kind of philosophy which has inspired 'Strong Words' and 'Northern Voices'. If people can begin to make some sense of their lives, heritage and roots, then they can begin to move more confidently in a complex and multicultural world. Where "definitions of class identity have moved in general from men to women, from the employed to the unemployed, from the oppression of material poverty to the damage done within" (Worpole) and where "class, which was once principally defined by gender and occupation, is now largely defined by lack of employment, social marginalisation and even criminalisation" (ibid). For Worpole (Federation of Worker Writers Magazine, Vol. 8, 1996, p2), "writing is a fundamental part of the process of creating both personal and collective identities ... as always, class comes back to speech, and the emotional range and power of the human voice as the principle form of cultural expression. Historically this has taken the form of jokes, story telling and gossip ... part of the

culture and politics of what recent anti-poverty campaigners have been driven to call the 'real world' of love, affection, sickness, poverty, mental illness, and existential despair, little of which will be heard from politicians in the coming election campaign, with their cross party consensus that in modern Britain we are all middle class and comfortable now".

The 'Strong Words' project described itself as "an independent socialist publishing venture based on the North East of England". Its publications were "based upon the lives and experiences of working class people in the area, expressed through the words of the people themselves: their own stories told in prose, in verse in conversation". The main aim of the series of publications was "to give working people the opportunity to publish their own feelings and ideas - about the past and future; about work and the lack of it; about family life, having children and being a child; about problems and happiness, victories and defeats". I want now to look at some examples of the material generated by 'Strong Words' and its successor 'Northern Voices' (formerly 'Durham Voices') in which I had a key role.

'Strong Words' and subsequent projects could be said to be influenced by the likes of Tommy Armstrong (quoted above) and his fellow pitman-poet Joseph Skipsey, who describes his own background vividly:

"I had no means of education to speak of. I was born on St Patrick's Day, 1832, in the village of Percy Main, near North Shields. That was the time of the great colliery strike. My

father was one of the leading men among the miners of our village and whilst trying to keep between his workmates and police was shot dead outside the 'Pineapple Inn' near Chirton. My mother Bella was left with eight children of whom I was the youngest, only four months old.

When I was seven years of age I went to work down the pit but even the mere pittance that I earned was of importance to a family such as ours, for those were times of desperate poverty. I became a trapper boy. I worked from twelve to sixteen hours a day in the bowels of the earth, seeing daylight only on Sundays for this was a life of work and sleep. That was when I taught myself to write. Mostly I sat in complete darkness, but occasionally a kindly miner would give me the end of his tallow candle which I struck against the wall with a bit of clay. At such happy seasons I amused myself by drawing figures upon the trapdoor and trying to write words by copying from hand-bills and notices I found from time to time ... I had begun to write down some of the verses that I had made, and here I ought to explain that I never wrote anything with a view to publication. I made verses because it seemed a natural and delightful thing to do. Most of my smaller pieces were composed as a I was walking to and from the pit and some of these have been praised as among the best I have written".

'Oh sleep,
Oh sleep my little baby,
Thou wilt wake thy father with thy cries

And he unto the pit must go before the sun begins to rise.
He'll toil for thee the whole day long
And, when the weary work is o'er,
He'll whistle thee a merry song
And drive the bogies from the door'.

(Armstrong, K. et al, The Pitman Poet from Percy Main, cassette, Northern Voices, 1991)

Indeed, it was only when Skipsey attempted to ape the stylistic manner of the 'literati' of the day that his writing rang hollow. In this he was like the Scots border poet James Hogg who as "the self-educated shepherd established his reputation as a writer and came into contact with the sophisticated literary world of Edinburgh, the predictable consequence was the he accepted too uncritically the validity of Edinburgh's opinions and fashions. As a result, many of his works are simply attempts to produce the kind of writing that he thought Edinburgh would admire - and this is one of the main reasons for the existence of the large body of unsuccessful verse which has done so much harm to his reputation ... Most of Hogg's best poetry was written when his object was to please himself rather than Edinburgh. Thus his many excellent songs make no concessions to the taste of genteel society, but are rather written in the spirit of the traditional folk-songs he knew as a child in Ettrick Forest" (Douglas S. Mack, Ed., James Hogg, Selected Poems. Open University Press). Such tensions are as valid today as they were in the days of both Skipsey and Hogg;

indeed, I feel them in my own writing and in my concern to speak with a regional non-metropolitan voice.

It is this concern which is at the heart of both 'Strong Words' and 'Northern Voices'. Listen, for example, to retired miner Fred Scott of Newburn, quoted in the publication 'Hello, Are You Working?' and in the magazine 'The Hard Times' (Vol. 2, 1983, p24-7):

"There's a lot who have authority but it's only power that's got a hold of them. It's not that the man is any different to me. The pollis is only a man the same as me. I don't think the vicar will be any better than me as regards living, to live a life. To help everybody - that's been my mainstay in all my life, right from a kid. We were fetched up that way - to care for people, and I've just continued on. We're all born the same and we all go back the same, and I say they shouldn't be allowed to hold as much land, none of them, because they're strangling the people with what they're doing. It's still going on. The whole lot of them are living off your back. These people are born into it, they've got it, and they're going to make sure you don't get it - but you're the man who's working, you're the man that's using the shovel. Freedom's a fascination. That's the main thing. Nobody to tell you to do this or do that. Free as the dicky birds".

And to farmer Joe Yeats of Gilsland in the booklet 'Missile Village' (Armstrong, K., Ed., Strong Words, 1978), reflecting on the impact of the Blue Streak rocket launcher development programme at nearby Spadeadam:

"Spadeadam was a good thing in a sense. We had no dole then in this part of the country. It was a big miss when it finished. But to me it was a useless asset. I suppose they would know what they were doing probably, but to me it was still a waste of money. When I was up in them fields out there, I would see this big puff of smoke over Spadeadam and I'd think 'Hey up, there's a few more thousand pound gone up in the sky there"' That's all it was, a puff of smoke, you know".

A feature of many of the 'Strong Words'/'Northern Voices' publications has been the attempt to link past and present by including material from young and old alike to reflect changing times in their communities. This from youngsters Jonathan Scott and Pamela Staley in the booklet 'Here I May Sweat And Dig For Lead: Teesdale mining traditions in the words of local people' (Northern Voices, 1991):

HANDS

A miner's hands are cold and cracked;
A miner's hands are cold and damp;
A miner's hands are never young;
A miner's hands are worn and dirty;
A miner's hands are sore and aching;
A miner's hands are always painful.
A miner's hands are his life-long tools:
Hands for playing when he is young,
Hands for working when he is strong,
Hands for begging when his life is almost done.

These poems by young people were in the tradition of the Teesdale lead-miner poet Richard Watson, described here by Claude Watson (also in 'Here I May Sweat And Dig For Lead'):

"Dick Watson was a good poet. He worked at Wire Gill but it was well known that he was fairly useless - and his wife was worse. At Wire Gill, there was a man who worked the horses; he drew the level. This chap used to get up early in the morning to get his horse ready for the start of work. He had a young lad that helped him. One morning he said to the young lad, 'Now, lad, thou just lie on this morning and watch the pantomime when 'Poetry Dick' gets up, what with bits of string and newspaper, 'tis a bonny pantomime!' Everything was fastened up with bits of string and newspaper to keep him warm!"

'Poetry Dick':

'Mary, what is there here
But toil and poverty?
As for the friends you're speaking of,
What have they done for me?
Here I may sweat and dig for lead,
'Mid smoke and dust to earn my bread,
And I go half clothed and half fed,
Till I can work no more'.

In the publication 'Where Explosions Are No More' (Keith Armstrong, Ed., 1988), miner John Egan of Trimdon told his own

story, the basis of a touring show which portrayed his life in narrative, poetry and folk-song:

"The first pony I got was a grand little fella. They called him 'Spring'. I always remember Spring. I can see him now, Spring, he was grey. All the ponies had names before they came down the pit: Boxer, Whiskey, Mottram, Martin, all sorts of names, but my pony was 'Spring'."

The booklet also featured poems and stories by local children like Dianne Duddin:

PIT-PONIES

Pit-ponies are blinded in the sunlight but, down in the pit, the ponies can see in the dark.
And the ponies pull the coal around like slaves, and for their night they rest in peace.

Whilst the pits are obviously gone, the tradition is not entirely lost and the culture is preserved by bands like 'The Whisky Priests' ('Life's Tapestry', Whippet Records, 1996), a young group from Sherburn Village, though they are admittedly an exception to the general rule:

'This village draws me,
I hear it calling me back through the years.
Its people are its life-blood,
I am its joy, I am its tears ...

This village haunts me,
Its whispering hurt tears at my soul.
Oh why did I forsake you?
Welcome me back, welcome me home.

A sacred bond exists here
Between the land and the people it owns.
It grants no escape from the realms of its fate,
It reaps the crops we have sown.

This village has made me all that I am
This village is calling me home'.

It is this sense of landscape which I tried to capture in 'O'er the Hills', a play based on the life of the wandering Northumbrian piper Jamie Allan (Armstrong, K. & Rigby, G., Northumberland Theatre Company, 1988):

JAMIE LIVES!

I see him.
Every time I see
the Coquet,
I see him.
Every time
I walk
the Cheviots,

I sense his voice.
I hear him
in the Curlew;
I hear Jamie
in the wind.
His tunes
haunt me still;
his wandering fingers
ripple through
the grass;
his tunes splash across the River,
skim
in me.

A sense of place, of Northumbrian roots, is also crucial to an understanding of the life and work of Tyneside's famous son, wood-engraver Thomas Bewick (1753-1828). It is particularly evident in Bewick's 'Memoir' (Iain Bain, Ed., 1979):

> "Well do I remember to this day, my father's well known Whistle which called me home - he went to a little distance from the House, where nothing obstructed the sound, & whistled so loud through his finger and thumb - that in the still hours of the Evening, it might be heard echoing up the Vale of the Tyne to a very great distance".

"From the little window at my bed-head, I noticed all the varying seasons of the year, and when the spring put in, I felt charmed with the music of the birds, which strained their little throats to proclaim it".

All of these impressions greatly influenced the art of Bewick. This is also true of the people he grew up with, who gave him a sense of tradition and common learning:

"The Winter evenings were often spent in listening to the traditionary Tales & Songs, relating to Men who had been eminent for their prowess & bravery in the Border Wars, and of others who had been esteemed for better & milder qualities, such as their having been good Landlords, kind Neighbours, and otherwise in every respect being bold, independent and honest Men. I used to be particularly struck or affected with the Warlike music & the Songs. These Songs & laments were commemorative of many worthies, but the most particular ones that I now remember were those respecting the Earl of Derwent-Water, who was beheaded in the year 1715".

"These cottagers were of an honest & independent character ... most of these poor Men, from their having little intercourse with the World, were in all their actions & behaviour truly original - except reading the Bible, local Histories & old Ballads, their knowledge

was generally limited - and yet one of these, 'Will Bewick', from being much struck with my performance which he called Pictures, became exceedingly kind to me, and was the first person from whom I gathered a kind of general knowledge of Astronomy & of the Magnitude of the universe. He had, the Year through, noticed the appearance of the stars & the Planets & would discourse largely on the subject. I think I see him yet, sitting on a mound or seat, by the Hedge of his Garden, regardless of the cold, and intent upon the heavenly bodies, pointing to them with his large hands and eagerly imparting his knowledge to me, with a strong voice ..."

Bewick is a key figure in the 'Geordie' heritage. Indeed, given that he died in Gateshead, an image of him and his work might have been more appropriate on the 'Gateway' site now occupied by the 'Angel of the North'. He worked in Newcastle when it was the most important printing centre in England outside London, Oxford and Cambridge, with twenty printers in the town, publishing more books than any other provincial city, including "songs and schoolbooks, histories and sermons, works in all shapes and sizes, as well as Bewick's 'Quadrupeds' and 'Birds'" (Brewer, Pleasures of the Imagination, 1997). This active publishing trade was backed up by a thriving cultural and social life represented by "nearly fifty clubs and societies, ranging from masonic lodges to floral societies, from debating clubs to political

associations, [which] met in coffee houses, club rooms and taverns ... In 1778 Bewick was elected to Swarley's Club, which met at the Black Boy Inn ... [and] he also spent time with members of a literary club "who kept a library of Books & held their meetings in a Room at Sam Allcocks, at the Sign of the Cannon, at the foot of the old Flesh Market". The society which included some woollen drapers and the cashier of a local bank, may have served as the model for the Philosophical Society that Bewick, together with a bookseller, land surveyor, coach painter, engineers and dissenting minister, founded in the 1770s to debate literature, philosophy and politics ... The bookplate of Richard Swarley proudly declaimed, 'Libertas Auro Pretiosior' (Liberty is more precious than gold); government spies broke up the club because of its radical, oppositional views during the Napoleonic Wars. The first occasion on which the radical bookseller and numismatist Thomas Spence set forth his views on the collective right to rural property was at a meeting of the Philosophical Society [from which he was later expelled - K.A.]. His agrarian socialism was controversial and Bewick, who was a firm believer in the virtues of private property, disliked it. On one occasion their differences led to a fight with cudgels in which the strongly built engraver gave the slender radical a terrible drubbing. But they remained friends throughout their lives. Bewick visited Spence after he had left Newcastle, and the Bewick-Beilby workshop gave Spence the tools and type he needed to publish his new and simplified alphabet" (ibid).

Bewick and his associates were asserting a collectivist vision

from a regionalist perspective and were not interested in merely aping London fashions. They "directly challenged any presumption that only gentlemen could be cultured and refined". The Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society was established in the belief that, "Knowledge, like fire, is brought forth by collision; and in the free conversations of associated friends many lights have been struck out, and served as tin to for the most important discoveries, which would not, probably, have occurred to their authors, in the refinements of private meditation" (ibid).

Aware of the kind of tradition which inspired Bewick, Alan Plater has this to say: "On the whole, born as we are from generations of disenfranchised voices, Geordie writers live easily enough with their ragbag of realities. The mere fact that we are able to write and see our work performed without being in hock to the Bloomsbury/Oxbridge axis, is awesome enough. On the whole, we are not cursed with Art in the Head. We see ourselves as makers, conscientious craftsmen who happen to be writers, just as our fathers happened to be railwaymen, shipbuilders or pitmen ... What we share, to borrow an idea from Sid Chaplin, is love of place and love of work. The shipyards and the coalfield, hideous as the conditions were, nevertheless created a lasting respect for the craft tradition, linked to the notion of community interdependence. Both of these traditions have suffered grievously during the 1980s, kicked almost to death by the bovver boots of Thatcherism. What survives is the possibility of love, and that survival depends in large measure on the writers ... Memory becomes history becomes legend ... In the North East, we

have long memories and a massive burden of history, ... an oral tradition, starting in childhood, hardened by inherited rage and love ... our stories should be dream-driven, not market-driven and they should be stories that in one form or another were first heard in a back yard, once upon a time" (Geordies, Eds. Colls & Lancaster, Chapter 4, 1992, p71-84).

The American broadcaster and oral historian Studs Terkel, whose books based on the recollections of 'so-called ordinary people' have chronicled American history since the Depression, recently attacked what he referred to as a "national Alzheimer's disease". "One of the things failing us today", he said, "is the elimination of the past, of history. Some of the kids don't know about the sixties, let alone world war two, let alone the depression". In speech, "he described lambasting a couple for failing to appreciate their forebears' sacrifices, and insisted people could change once they were educated" (The Guardian, 11/6/98).

It is the belief which underpins the 'Strong Words' and 'Northern Voices' projects the kind of belief which motivated North East writers like Jack Common and Sid Chaplin; a belief which is not quite dead, for, in Chaplin's words:

> "There are a few people in my life who represent more than father-figures. They are rocks you can strike any time and get living water, trees under whose mighty branches you can shelter - and the fruit and blossom are constantly there, elemental beings whose voice you

can hear at any time. This is not an explanation but a statement - how it happens in a mystery - but once met they become part of your psyche. There is no need to call up their ghosts. They live on in you".

(Foreword to 'Sam in the Morning', 1989)

Chapter 10. 'CULTURAL PARACHUTISTS: COMMUNITY ARTS AND 'THE GREASY POLE'

> "The fragmentation and insecurity of the late twentieth century is more than subject matter for contemporary artists, it is the condition that helped to create them" (Robert Hewison).

Any notion of Community Arts should, in my view, be concerned with decentralisation, devolution, local autonomy, and 'people power'. It should stand against institutionalisation in its concern to let local people express themselves freely, independent of vested interests exercised by political parties, business interests, quangos and other self-perpetuating institutions. This is especially crucial in this era of market obsession, for, as Hewison articulates extremely well, "the arts embody values - imagination, independence of mind, creativity of expression, shared experience, cooperation, above all a sense of mutual worth and common identity - that are not the values of the market-place and which are not susceptible to market-led solutions" (Culture and Consensus, 1997, p313). Hewison believes that "the failure of the public culture has been to generate values to which insufficient numbers of people can subscribe. Instead, we have been offered values that are transitory, individualistic, atomised and destructive of community ... The crisis of national identity is a reflection of the destruction of a common space in which to express it; the need for its

reaffirmation is all the more urgent in order to counter the utter alienation of post-modern globalisation and homogenisation" (ibid). His thoughts are echoed by Raymond Williams: "We lack a genuinely common experience, except in certain rare and dangerous moments of crisis ... We need a common culture, not for the sake of an abstraction, but because we cannot survive without it" (Williams, Culture and Society, 1961, p314).

It does not seem to me that bodies such as the Arts Council and Northern Arts are likely to be in the forefront of any 'cultural renaissance'. Joan Hugman, who has looked critically at Northern Arts for many years, agrees: "If you want to be sure that your provision is serving the local people, you have to consult. I think that what we find now is that Northern Arts make declarations about what they are going to do and then what little consultation that takes place is usually after this statement and I think that undercuts any confidence they might have that they are actually providing". Northern Arts for her are "aspirational and have a certain amount of divided loyalty. They're not really serving the region, they see themselves as a satellite of the Arts Council, serving the region is a kind of secondary purpose, their bigger purpose is to work for the Arts Council and I think their centre of gravity is elsewhere. They feel that they know what 'Art' is and that most people here don't and I think the whole Gormley-Damien Hirst scenario is part of that: that locals cannot appreciate Modern Art, they don't have the education, they don't have the sensibilities and, therefore, they're trying to persuade us that this is 'Good Art', not entirely successfully I

have to say. I think that Northern Arts officers think they're very well-meaning and I'm sure they believe that but, how many people employed by Northern Arts are local?" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

In the mad rush to board the 'gravy-train' of Lottery funding and to accommodate the whims of market-forces the Regional Arts Board in partnership with the Arts Council would seem to have forgotten any notion of 'Community Arts', any real sense of the region's turbulent history; it is left to the local authorities and the Northern Arts endorsed chain of Arts Development Officers employed by the Councils to administer their cultural strategies for business, heritage and tourism. There is no room for dissent here, this is using the Arts for economic purposes or as pure therapy. Ultimately, it is displaying allegiance to central government and big-business, though the 'lone-ranging' artist is occasionally funded to go about his or her politically harmless way over the heads of the majority of local people who don't even have a say as to how their hard-earned Lottery contributions are allocated - that is left to the ever-increasing tide of Arts administrators. In this scenario, it is no wonder that people like Joan Hugman "worry about this term 'Community Artist'." It seems to her that people use it to indicate someone who's not quite a high-flyer, not quite 'up to the knocker' - he (or she) works with local groups, and is not going to make a name for himself in 'the Big City'." She thinks "that's a great pity, because the best of community artists work with the people and what they produce is much more worthwhile in that sense" (ibid).

Hugman, like her colleague Bill Lancaster at 'Northern Review', the political and cultural journal for the North East region which is not funded by Northern Arts, relishes the degree of autonomy which comes from being free of institutionalised funding (indeed the journal is funded only by the Shields Snooker Centre!). Hugman: "'Northern Review' provides a forum for people to write. We didn't want to be part of the Northern Arts bandwagon because we thought that people wouldn't be able to write freely if we were hemmed in by relying on Northern Arts funding which is bound to be a restrictive process. We sit at the critical end of the literary spectrum and that means we don't sit very happily with their P.R." (ibid).

Bill Lancaster, in particular, is extremely sceptical of the value of Northern Arts artist-placements in the region:

"My first reaction about the 'parachutists' who come in is that, looking back, I tend to think: of what consequence have they been? They've been parachuted in and they've left very little behind of any meaning, so one could argue that the whole thing's been a grandiose waste of money. On the other hand, what is real and is viable and is vital up here has largely taken place outside the ambit of the cultural institutions such as Northern Arts. It's been indigenous, it's come off the streets, or it's been there all the time and has survived and flourished. I think the problem I have, and many of us on 'Northern Review' have, is that we tend to be fairly agnostic about the public funding of the Arts. One of the great things about not having a grant from Northern Arts, and watching what's happening around us, is

actually observing the antics of the 'grant awardee class', as they seem to spend half their lives stabbing each other in the back about who's going to get the next grant and slagging each other off in the pages of the other 'Northern Review' [the Northern Arts monthly magazine - K.A.]. I find it all terribly amusing but, in a sense, also very sad because, and to go back to my earlier point, what the hell have they left, what the hell have they done? I look and I look and I look and I don't see anything coming from it. The problem is that Northern Arts are in both a no-win situation and a no-lose situation. They cannot lose - here is an artist who we've brought in on a fellowship, he's a great artist - why is he a great artist? Because we say he's a great artist! - and he leaves and they say well there's these readings and these paintings produced or this play took place, therefore we have a measurable outcome, therefore it was a success. Again, there's a fundamental philosophical problem about the funding of the Arts, about Arts patronage. Instinctively, as democrats, we all know that the public sector should support the Arts; the problem is that most Arts production is intensely subjective - you can't get much more subjective than sitting down writing a poem or a play or doing a painting. Yet, somehow, we expect objective judgements on that subjectivity. Of course, the Arts funding group are always going to tell you they're objective and we know damned well that they're not. So it's a recipe for conflict and I just cannot see how it can be resolved. You can make Keith Armstrong Literary Officer of Northern Arts to dish out lots of money to his pals who he thinks deserve it but there

are other people who will disagree quite strongly, as you well know. How do you do it? It's incredibly difficult" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

Live Theatre, based on the Quayside in Newcastle and recent recipients of a million pounds Lottery award, once took agit-prop theatre around the local communities and, in their infancy, refused Northern Arts funding. For Michael Mould of the Bruvvers Theatre Company, still doing the business 'out in the sticks', this constitutes something of a 'sell-out':

"The compromise that Live Theatre has made in receiving the franchise grant from Northern Arts has made a theatre which has to tour to the set theatres, like the Customs House in South Shields, and the plays then cater to the audience that visit those, largely middle-class, an elite audience. It's just another way that the funders have diverted a working-class or popular theatre movement. Live Theatre has had to go into the whole body of bureaucracy. Northern Arts insist on a proper management function, and then that management body has to be serviced, so you need a full-time administrator who's just sending out papers to the management body, and it's bollocks! They've got ten or eleven members of staff, with no actors employed - the actors are just employed doing a show for eight weeks or two months at a time, and then they only do a couple of shows a year. They're having to do ventures like the Theatre Royal in order to earn money!"

For Mould, 'class' is the central issue when you are looking at a body like Northern Arts. Mould: "Northern Arts are basically a

middle-class organisation and they're concerned with providing art for their own class. It doesn't look good on their C.V. if something exciting is happening and they haven't had anything to do with it; on the other hand, it doesn't look good if they're financing something that is revolutionary or political. They're concerned with what they think is 'High Art'. They had a whole Community Arts Panel at one point and they fought against that tooth and nail and eventually eliminated it" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1996).

A key figure in that process of elimination was Peter Hewitt, once an Arts Development Officer at North Tyneside Council, before becoming Community Arts Officer at Northern Arts, then Deputy Director and later Chief Executive of that august body. To put the cultural lid on it, he has recently become Chief Executive of the Arts Council of England! Hewitt, whom I interviewed in his days as Chief Executive of Northern Arts, had this to say:

"What we did in great summary, was to hand the responsibility (for Community Arts) on to local government. Now you might say 'was local government going to fulfil the Community Arts ethos?' I suppose my reaction to that would be it is for local government to decide". This seems to imply a somewhat complacent trust in the level of vision usually associated with the entrenched, often philistine, attitudes of local Labour councils. As Christopher Harvie asserts: "Labour in the North East has never been challenged, is corrupt and hasn't had a political idea in years" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1996).

As David Byrne points out, though, "there are many good, kind and hardworking people in the North's Labour Party and movement" but, "on the principle that the scum also rises, there are fewer of them the higher you go". For him, under 'New Labour', "yet again the loyalty of the North to Labour has been rewarded by the North in general and Labour activists in particular being treated like a bunch of nodding donkeys. So what else is new?" (Northern Review, Vol. 6, 1998, p85-94).

Yet Hewitt does recognise some of the contradictions in the Northern Arts position: "What I have got is a really deep, deep passion and love of the North of England, of the people in the North of England of all classes, because it is more working-class than most other regions of the U.K. What really angers me is when I see arrogance, centralisation, London based metropolitan values dominating which at times come through Northern Arts because we're accountable to London as well and we have that difficult mix of having to please London in order to get the best possible result for the North of England and then distribute in the North of England on terms acceptable to the North of England and that's actually a really difficult equation that you've got to try and meet all the time" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1996).

A commitment to Community Arts can challenge the abuse of power by its concern to offer opportunities for local people to find their own voice. As Robert Hewison emphasises: "A common culture is also a critical culture, for it becomes the arena for argument ... [and] uses continuity as a bridge to the future, not as a dead weight from the past".

He affirms that "the crisis of the arts cannot be resolved without the development of a cultural policy that is free of the instrumental imperatives of market forces. ... With the enthusiastic collaboration of the arts bureaucracies that depend on subsidy-distribution for their salaries, politicians of all hues defend public funding of the arts on grounds that have nothing to do with what artists have to say, and everything to do with the turnover they can achieve. This has changed the language of the arts, and in such a language there are things it becomes impossible to say ... What we should be arguing for is not value for money, but money for values" (Culture and Consensus, 1997, p313-4).

Only then might we, to quote Jonathan Glancey, overturn a state of affairs in which "the politics of the British art world is all too often dreary stuff, the mild excrescence of little minds more concerned with keeping and holding down jobs than with art" (The Guardian, 12/3/98).

Chapter 11. TWINNING 'GEORDIELAND' WITH EUROPE: SOME PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

> 'Travel broadens the mind. It is even more heartening when it strengthens the inherited passion and prejudice' (Alan Plater).

'Ein bier bitter - und ein Martini for the wife', demanded the delegate from Peterlee Cricket Club of the German barman in the twin-town of Nordenham. Spotting he was of English extraction, the barman, in near impeccable style, politely enquired, 'Sweet or Dry, sir?' 'Just the one!' came the reply, our delegate returning triumphantly to his stool in the town's 'Beer Akademie', thinking how well he'd countered a German plot to sell him one drink too many.

Having eavesdropped this touching exchange, I thought to myself, 'So that's what twinning is all about!' As one of the coordinators of the initiative, I felt I was entitled to wonder just how the twinning link had transpired and was it worth all the effort. This was back in 1980-6 and times were hard in the mining communities around Peterlee. People's minds were concentrated on survival; 'twinning' could hardly be considered paramount, but it played a small part in expanding horizons. By 1986, I'd made eight visits to Nordenham with different groups and individuals, including the Youth Drama Workshop, the East Durham Writers' Workshop, and the local band, 'The Montgolfier Brothers' (ex-'DTs', ex-'Sick Note', ex-'Death By Trombone'!).

For many, this was their first excursion to foreign shores, and it changed them.

Naturally, there was method in the developmental madness. It was meant to alter fixed attitudes, get the ball off the Durham island, develop links, forge exchanges, and generally broaden political and cultural understanding. Not that it was plain-sailing, of course. I well remember a night out with 'The Montgolfier Brothers' around several local bars, ending with an extended toasting session with a man with a monocle and a scar down his cheek who we promptly christened 'Uncle Herman'. Uncle Herman declared a passion for British Scientists and offered Schnapps all round for every such scientist we could name. I think a general state of collapse was declared after the toast of 'Michael Faraday!' Yet the band bounced back and gave several outstanding performances in the town's schools and in the community centre. Their single at the time, 'Things That Go Bump In The Night', quickly became a cult hit in Nordenham.

So we weren't short of the odd moments of humour, though, in fact, we did get through a lot of hard work, with the Writers' Workshop performing, with translation, their poems and songs in the town's schools and at an Ant-Nuclear rally. General political and cultural discussion was always encouraged and usually ensued. During the 1984-5 Miners' Strike, the twin-town of Nordenham sent parcels of food and toys to the striking miners and their families and made financial contributions to the 'Save Easington Area Mines Campaign'. And we vividly remember heading the Nordenham May Day procession and visiting local factories there.

Our delegation generally stayed in twin-town homes, a gesture which was usually reciprocated when our friends from the Nordenham trades unions and peace group visited us in Peterlee. Many of the twinning links in North East England are with German and French towns and our positive experience of Nordenham has led myself and others connected with 'Northern Voices' to seek to develop further links, building on this success to overcome the negative feelings local people often have of such connections, viewing them as council 'junkets' and the like. Whilst this 'junketing' does still go on, there is scope for getting involved in promoting more constructive political and cultural dialogue with our twinning partners, especially more significant in the changing European landscape. Indeed, in recent years, through the good offices of Durham's Euro M.P., Stephen Hughes, poets and musicians from 'Northern Voices' performed at the European Parliament in Strasbourg!

The town of Tübingen in Southern Germany has been described as 'a town on a campus', given that out of a total population of 77,000, 25,000 are students and 8,000 employees of the University. So that the nature of its twinning with County Durham is distinctly academic compared to the more industrial nature of both Nordenham and Peterlee. It has also a somewhat richer history in a number of ways - Hegel studied there, the eccentric poet Friedrich Hölderlin lived there in his Tower for thirty years and expired there, and Herman Hesse, the writer, worked in a bookshop there in his formative youth. To this extent, the

town's Cultural Office was interested in a literary link and 'Northern Voices' was, therefore, invited, and funded, by Durham County Council's International Exchange Officer to pioneer a literary connection in 1987. Since then sixteen successful visits have been made, featuring poets, and musicians in the folk and jazz idioms. Readings have been staged in schools, pubs, and at the University, and reciprocal visits to Durham by Tübingen poets and the University's Anglo-Irish Theatre Group arranged. We have also participated in discussions on regional culture in the new Europe. In both the twinning examples highlighted above, the links forged have led to anthologies being published. To accompany a visit by East Durham Writers' Workshop to Nordenham in 1986, a bi-lingual pamphlet, 'North Sea Poems', produced and, in the case of Tuebingen, a joint bi-lingual anthology, 'Poets Voices', featuring poets from both Durham and Tübingen, was launched in the Hölderlin Tower in June 1991 (Cultural Office, Tübingen/Durham County Council, 1991).

Other interesting twinning links which 'Northern Voices' has pioneered in the cultural field are those between Newcastle upon Tyne and its Dutch counterpart, Groningen, and between Wear Valley and Ivry-sur-Seine (just outside Paris). And 'Northern Voices' remains committed to this area of cultural work now and in the future. This might have a lot to do with our being based on the North Sea coast. Certainly, in my own case, not only did my father graft in the shipyards for forty years, and his father before him, but his tales of his Merchant Navy days and of travels to Rio, Cape Town, Lisbon and so on truly inspired me as

an impressionable youth and this excitement in travelling has carried over into my cultural activities. As a founding member of the 'Tyneside Poets' group back in the 1970s, I vividly recall the links we developed with our Icelandic counterparts, and, in particular, our visit to Reykjavik during the Cod War of 1976 when I performed my epic poem, 'Cod Save The Queen', to an audience of over two hundred excited Icelanders. This was followed by a visit in 1980 to Georgia in the then Soviet Union. After one late night session with a worker-writers' group in the steel-works town of Rustavi, I coined the following short poem:

(TO A FELLOW WRITER IN RUSTAVI)

Last night we swapped our shirts
They didn't fit our bodies too well
But they fitted our mood
Exactly.

Such memories stay with you for the rest of your life. We all live in the global village.

Chapter 12. 'GEORDIE' FUTURES

> 'The best among the poor are never grateful; they are disobedient and rebellious, and they are quite right to be so. Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue' (Oscar Wilde).
>
> 'He who does not know history is destined to remain a child' (Cicero).

"Part and parcel of North East culture is its irreverence. Jack Common teaches us how to be irreverent. What you can't have are scenes that you get in some of the journals which are supported by Northern Arts which seem to spend all their time licking each other's genitals - there's an awful lot of that goes on: 'Isn't Northern Arts wonderful? Isn't this person wonderful because he's got a Northern Arts grant? We dare not rock the boat because we might get our grant taken away'. That sort of cultural production gives no space whatsoever for what we're really about. There's an amazing continuity between Jack Common and 'Viz' - 'Viz' doesn't piss about with Northern Arts grants. What 'Viz' captures, which has been admired throughout Britain, and indeed beyond, is this sense of irreverence" (Bill Lancaster, interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

This is an asset we need to keep hold of in this complex world. Such a cultural characteristic is vital in fighting for a

decentralised society in alliance with those people who share similar cultural understandings:

"Geologically and geographically, [the] larger north of England region, like Scotland and Wales, is part of 'Highland Britain' and has a distinct and often cruel history going back at least as far as the Roman occupation. The distinctive personal characteristics of English 'northerners' - hard-working, practical, independent-minded, plain-spoken, sociable - are derived largely from the same original roots as most Scots and Welsh: close-knit industrial communities based on mines, factories and non-conformist religion, and, while there are important exceptions, a predominantly 'socialistic' or community orientated attitude" (Victor Cockerill, Northern Review, Vol. 5, 1997, p76-84).

Strengths to draw on then, though I am not pretending that the way ahead is easy in a period of such intense, often painful, changes. Like Robert Colls, we must ask "What sort of North East is it possible to imagine that has no pits?" His reply offers a little comfort: "Well, we are left with place, for this is our place and not some other place. And we are left with our practices, for we have never entirely surrendered our lives to market individualism. And then there is this place and its practices redolent with memories and meanings. Out of this culture our new community is ready to develop and, in the struggles for living together which are to come, we will need every cultural resource we can muster" (Northern Review, Vol. 3, 1995, p9-262).

This a major political undertaking that asks questions for the future of the region. For Bill Lancaster, "we've always had a small cultural intelligentsia based primarily in Newcastle but we've now got a fairly large, distinctive, broad-based cultural class which has done many good things over the last ten years but what we haven't got is a political class. The reason we haven't got a political class is I suppose that since 1945 the North East has been seen as easy-pickings for the Labour Party - it's an area where it's very easy to place candidates from outside in safe-seats. Because of the scandal of the early 70s, there's a lack of competence amongst the Labour elite up here. Regionalism has never really been on the agenda of the political class until the last five years and we don't really have a twentieth century tradition of producing a class of people who have the politics of the region close to heart. We'd have to go back to the nineteenth century and Joseph Cowen, to come across people like that. What's happened, I suppose, is that people vote Labour and think that that's enough to, in a sense, give vent to [their] grievances. The problem is that you can't really have the politics of regionalism based entirely on grievance, you also need politicians of vision, politicians who have some idea of what this region could look like" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997).

The time, you might say, has come. With a Scottish parliament sitting in Edinburgh, surely the average 'Geordie' might begin to feel that this region deserves an assembly too and, as David Marquand has speculated, "If devolution leaks southwards into the

north of England, there will be still more alternative power centres, challenging the hegemony of the metropolis and articulating values at odds with metropolitan economic orthodoxy" (The Guardian, 2/5/98). For all its weaknesses, a Northern Assembly would at least "concentrate everyone's minds wonderfully on the region and on who's serving who" (Joan Hugman, interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997). Because local identity is not just heartfelt, inherited, instructive, it can also, according to Christopher Harvie, "be engineered", by "creating political structures which make people think local". A Northern Assembly would be part of that process and Harvie would also "look at the way in which county and borough authorities, and communities also, are organised". For him too "if you introduced proportional representation, where there's a much greater range of parties, you can get the starting up of totally new political ideas" (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1996). What must be remembered is that small-scale community and voluntary organisations must not be marginalised in any moves towards regionalism for "these small groups are the basic building block of community and the entry point for the 'socially excluded' to join or re-enter society" (John Routledge, The Guardian, 1/4/98). As Peter Wilby has pointed out (The Observer, 2/11/97): "The Left lost the initiative when it withdrew from a dialogue with ordinary people, when it became contemptuous and dismissive of their beliefs, insights and aspirations". It is partly through a commitment to Community Arts projects which encourage self-expression and promote an interest in local affairs in a global context that the

initiative can be regained. Yes, we have much in our culture to celebrate. "But with globalisation comes the growing recognition that nobody has one identity. There isn't anyone who doesn't have complex cultural roots. The Brits suddenly discover half of them are really French, they speak a language partly based on Norse, they came from Scandinavia, they're Romans, many have gone to live in Australia and the Himalayas. The notion that what holds people together is one culture, handed down unchanged, and the worst thing in the world is any mixture, is turned on its head. That is how culture dies. That is how they ossify and put up the barricades. Cultures live when they take on the people next door, adopt some of their customs, adapt to the new conditions, and thereby create something genuinely new" (Stuart Hall, New Statesman, 28/11/97). For Peter Conrad "the future surely lies to the east, not across that yawning western ocean. Rather than mimicking dystopian America, shouldn't we be learning how to be good Europeans?" (The Observer, 5/7/98).

In this belief, Conrad has an ally in Bill Lancaster (interview by Keith Armstrong, 1997): "Historically, the first point to remember is that for much of the nineteenth century Newcastle was the biggest port in the world. There are very strong Scandinavian links because of this but, as the port diminished, those connections diminished. There's something almost surreal when you go to that building on the corner of Queen Street and the Quayside where it's got 'Daily Boats to Ghent' and you think, bloody hell, that used to happen here! Then you look across the river and you see the Flour Mill with 'Baltic' written on the

side of it. There is much evidence to show that the connections across the North Sea are actually going to strengthen over the next decades and those old memories, perhaps, will be taken down and dusted off and reinvented in all sorts of different and exciting ways. My counterparts in Norway and Sweden in the maritime cities have similar cultural dreams and, if the economic connections are revived, we might get those going again".

'The lines of life are various; they diverge and cease
Like footpaths and the mountains' utmost ends'.

(Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), Tübingen,
Germany, translated by Michael Hamburger)

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